EMERSON'S TRAVELS

CANADA'S ERRANT ELEPHANT SEAL

VATICAN X-FILES THE CHURCH AND THE SUPERNATURAL

MONKEY PUZZLES TALES OF THE DEVIL'S MARMITE TREE

THEY USED DARK FORCES WITCHES VERSUS NAZIS

THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST NEWS

RADIOACTIVE WOLVES • WORM CHARMERS • INDIAN SPY PIGEON

THE D OF STRANGE PHENOMENA WWW.FORTEANTIMES.COM

ForteanTimes

FT446 JULY 2024
£5.25

DR KARL SHUKER'S

CREATURE FEATURES

OUR RESIDENT CRYPTOZOOLOGIST BRAVES THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST MONSTER MOVIES

MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS

PARALLEL UNIVERSES & ALTERNATE REALITIES!

HOODED HORRORS

PHANTOM MONKS AND SPECTRAL NUNS!

BACK FROM THE FUTURE

TIME-TRAVELLING COSMIC CULTISTS!

07
9 770308 589279

ForteanTimes PRESENTS

THE UFO FILES

From the archives of FORTEAN TIMES, the world's foremost journal of strange phenomena, comes a new collection exploring the fascinating world of UFOs.

The perfect starting point for anyone wanting to get up to speed on the ever-changing landscape of UFO research, this special edition from Fortean Times presents classic cases covering nearly 80 years of ufology – from the first modern UFO sighting in 1947 that gave us the term 'flying saucer' to the latest controversy over Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAPs) reported by US military personnel.

Join us as we investigate what really happened in Rendlesham Forest in December 1980, ask whether UFO close encounters can have deadly consequences for witnesses, explore the weird world of alien abductions and uncover the 1960s hoax that saw Britain's police and military dealing with a flying saucer invasion!

Plus, our resident UFO experts Jenny Randles and Nigel Watson provide updates and analysis to help readers put famous cases into context and separate ufological fact from fiction.

ForteanTimes PRESENTS

THE UFO FILES

CLASSIC CASES, NEW DISCOVERIES AND GOVERNMENT COVER-UPS

INVASION 1967
HOW A WAVE OF UFO LANDINGS STUNNED THE BRITISH NATION

ALIENS IN AZTEC
DID A SAUCER CRASH TO EARTH IN THE NEW MEXICO DESERT

BRITAIN'S ROSWELL
INVESTIGATING THE RENDLESHAM FOREST UFO INCIDENT

50 SHADES OF GREY
THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF EXTRATERRESTRIAL SEX EXPERIMENTS

PLUS UPDATES AND ANALYSIS FROM UFO EXPERTS JENNY RANDLES & NIGEL WATSON

£7.49

Death by UFO
The mangled wreckage of his plane was found an hour later

The Entertainer, the President, and the Aliens
He had a little-known interest in the paranormal and unexplained

Incident at Aztec

IN SHOPS NOW OR ORDER ONLINE AT:
shop.forteantimes.com/ft446ufo

CONTENTS

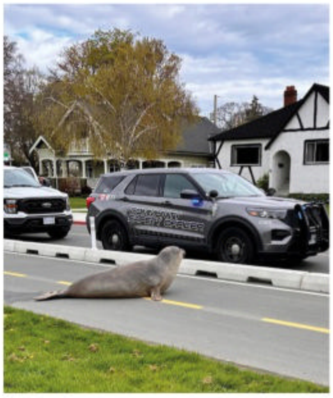
30 *Karl Shuker's movie monsters*

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

06 *Chernobyl's radioactive wolves*

RAGGEDSTONE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

42 *Ghostly monks and nuns*



DFO CANADA

10 *Emerson: elephant seal at large*

SYD MOORE

55 *Syd Moore's witches of WWII*

18 *Standing stones in Seventies television*

ForteanTimes
CREATURE FEATURES

FORTEAN TIMES 446

Why fortean ?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE 68

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Vatican X-Files, spy birds, Weird Weekend North, the multiverse and much more...

12 ARCHÆOLOGY
14 CLASSICAL CORNER
18 GHOSTWATCH
22 STRANGE CONTINENT
24 ALIEN ZOO
28 THE UFO FILES

FEATURES

30 COVER STORY RAIDER OF THE LOST MONSTER FLICKS

What does a cryptozoologist do when the world goes into lockdown? One of the (very) few upsides of the Covid-19 restrictions endured in the UK was the opportunity for **KARL SHUKER** to watch far more monster movies than he normally would (or could) have done! Now, he shares his favourites.

38 TIFFANY THAYER vs THE FLYING SAUCERS

In an extract from his new book, **JOSHUA BLU BUHS** examines the often uneasy relationship between Tiffany Thayer's Fortean Society and flying saucer enthusiasts in the 1940s and 1950s.

42 MYSTERY MONKS & VANISHING NUNS

The indefatigible **ROB GANDY** heads backs to some old haunts to collect further tales of phantom hooded figures on the roads of Halsall Moss and of some spine-tingling encounters with spectral sisters in various locations around Merseyside...

SERIES

55 FORTEAN FICTION
Wartime Magic **SYD MOORE**

64 FORTEAN TRAVELLER
The Curiosities of Venice **ULRICH MAGIN**

69 PECULIAR POSTCARDS
The Mermaid of Bognor **JAN BONDESON**

FORUM

47 The Devil's Marmite tree **TED HARRISON**
48 "A little too much UFOing going on"? **PETER A McCUE**

REGULARS

02 EDITORIAL
51 REVIEWS
59 LETTERS
68 READER INFO
70 PHENOMENOMIX
72 STRANGE DEATHS

ForteanTimes

EDITOR
DAVID SUTTON
drsutton@forteantimes.com

FOUNDING EDITORS
BOB RICKARD (ft-bobrickard@mail.com)
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteantimes.com)

NEWS EDITOR
IAN SIMMONS (simmons@forteantimes.com)

ART DIRECTOR
ETIENNE GILFILLAN (etienne@forteantimes.com)

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR
DAVID V BARRETT (dvbarrett@forteantimes.com)

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
ABIGAIL MASON

RESIDENT CARTOONIST
HUNT EMERSON

PRODUCTION MANAGER
LEE BOYMAN (lee.boyman@metropolis.co.uk)

ADVERTISING
JAMES KELLOCK (james.kellock@metropolis.co.uk)

FT ON THE INTERNET

www.forteantimes.com
www.facebook.com/forteantimes
Twitter/X: @forteantimes

FORTEAN TIMES is produced for Diamond Publishing Limited, a member of the Metropolis Group, by **WILD TALENTS LTD.** Postal address: Fortean Times, PO BOX 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH.

SUBSCRIPTIONS
UK DD 6 Issues: £27.95 / 1 Year 13 Issues: £55.95
EUR/USA & CANADA 1 Year 13 Issues: £66.95
Rest of World 1 Year 13 Issues: £75.95

TO CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS, RENEW YOUR SUBSCRIPTION OR REPORT PROBLEMS:
hello@metropolis.co.uk / +44 (0) 208 752 8195

LICENSING & SYNDICATION
FORTEAN TIMES is available for international licensing and Syndication
Managing Director
David Saunders TEL: +44 (0) 208 752 8195
david.saunders@metropolis.co.uk

DISTRIBUTED IN UK, IRELAND AND WORLDWIDE
by 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6QA
0330 390 6464 **Email: Hello@Marketforce.co.uk**

diamondpublishing

PUBLISHED BY DIAMOND PUBLISHING LIMITED.
A MEMBER OF THE METROPOLIS GROUP.

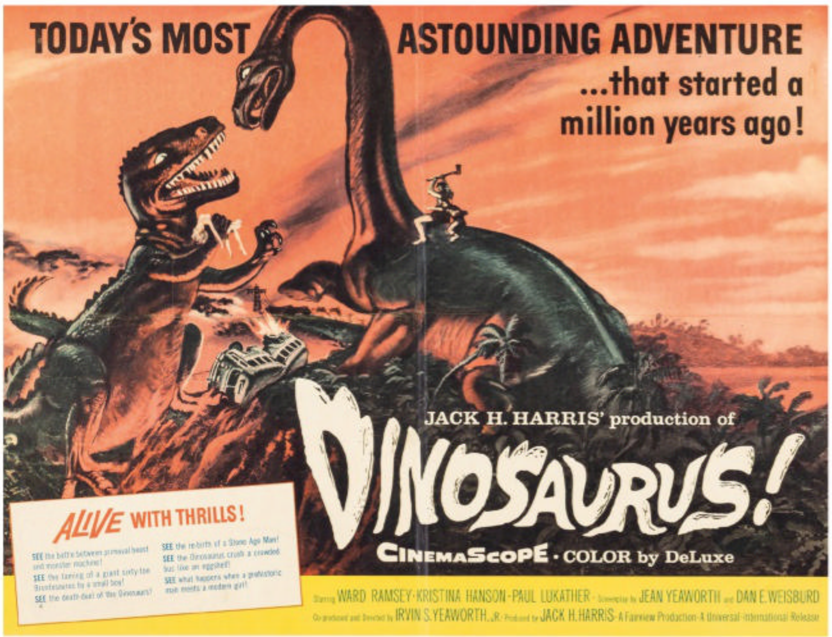
Fortean Times (ISSN 0308-5899, PE 23226) is published monthly with an extra issue in August by Diamond Publishing, 2nd Floor, Saunders House, 52-53 The Mall, Ealing, London W5 3TA, United Kingdom. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150- 15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. **POSTMASTER**: Send address changes to Fortean Times, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
© Diamond Publishing Limited: MAY 2024

COVER ILLUSTRATION
ETIENNE GILFILLAN
WITH THANKS TO KARL SHUKER

PRINTED BY PRECISION
COLOUR PRINTING

EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS


TODAY'S MOST ASTOUNDING ADVENTURE
...that started a million years ago!
JACK H. HARRIS' production of
DINOSAURUS!
CinemaScope · COLOR by DeLuxe
ALIVE WITH THRILLS!
SEE the battle between primeval beast and monster machine!
SEE the taming of a giant sixty-ton Brontosaurus by a small boy!
SEE the death-duel of the Dinosaurs!
SEE the re-birth of a Stone Age Man!
SEE the Dinosaurus crush a crowded bus like an eggshell!
SEE what happens when a prehistoric man meets a modern girl!
Starring WARD RAMSEY · KRISTINA HANSON · PAUL LUKATHER · Screenplay by JEAN YEAWORTH and DAN E. WEISBURD
Co-produced and Directed by IRVIN S. YEAWORTH, JR. · Produced by JACK H. HARRIS · A Fairview Production · A Universal-International Release

HERITAGE AUCTIONS

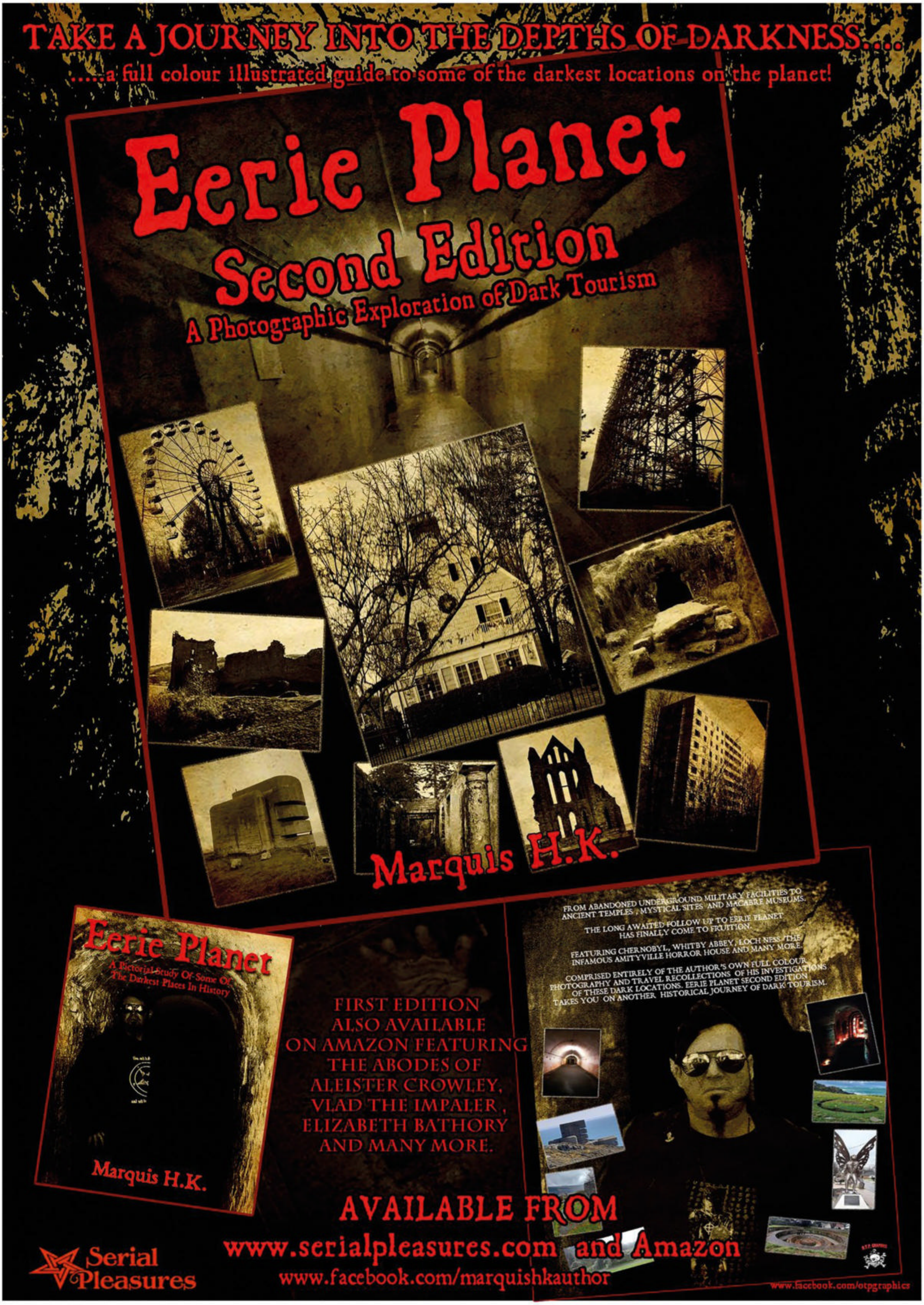
LOVE AND MONSTERS

We were surprised when chatting recently to cryptozoologist, author and head keeper of FT's Alien Zoo, Dr Karl Shuker, when he informed us that he had never, in all his years of writing for *Fortean Times*, been granted the honour of a cover story. Could this really be true? Well, we're still not 100 per cent certain, but it appeared that this was at least one glaring omission we could finally put right: so, not only does Karl get this month's prized cover slot, but he also gets to be the cover star, going full Indiana Jones in the process. Dr Shuker here shares his experience of the UK's Covid lockdowns. As he points out, there were very few upsides to dwell on, but at least he had the opportunity to take a deep dive into his ever-expanding DVD collection of monster movies, some celebrated, some forgotten and some that never made it out of the straight-to-video bargain bin. Obviously, we could only choose a selection of the many titles that Karl has covered on his movie blog – you can visit it for more – but we thoroughly enjoyed revisiting these forgotten (sometimes with good reason) flicks and crypto-cinema obscurities, and even discovered some films quite unknown to us – *Terror Birds*, anyone?

If neither monsters nor movies are your thing, there's the usual full complement of assorted weirdness to enjoy elsewhere in this issue. We're particularly pleased to share a preview of an important new book about the impact of Fort's work on modern culture. Joshua Blu Buhs's *Think to Other Worlds* offers an ambitiously broad perspective on how thinkers, writers, science fictioneers and sceptics used Fort's writings to help make sense of the rapidly changing 20th century scene; in this extract, Blu Buhs looks at the response of forteans – particularly of Fortean Society founder, *Doubt* editor and raging contrarian Tiffany Thayer – to the vexed question of UFOs, how they fitted into wider earthbound power structures and what exactly a fortean should make of them... We also have more first-hand accounts of ghostly goings-on in Merseyside from Rob Gandy, as well as his bulletin from this year's Weird Weekend North, fortean finds from Venice in Ulrich Magin's Fortean Traveller, Ted Harrison on the lore of the monkey puzzle and Syd Moore sharing the inspiration for her new novel about wartime magic, *The Grand Illusion*.

ERRATA

FT441:63: "Having read the Reverend's Review in the Feb 2024 edition," writes James Anderson, "I was a little perplexed by the review of the film *Mausoleum*. It stated that the protagonist's surname was Nemod and advised we should 'read that backwards'. But that equates to Domen!" Peter Laws has fessed up: the character's name was actually Susan *Nomed* – which, of course, gives us "demon" when read backwards, a none too subtle hint that Susan has been possessed by a malign spirit. We honestly have no idea what Peter hears when he plays his heavy metal records backwards...



TAKE A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS OF DARKNESS....

.....a full colour illustrated guide to some of the darkest locations on the planet!

Eerie Planet

Second Edition

A Photographic Exploration of Dark Tourism

Marquis H.K.

FROM ABANDONED UNDERGROUND MILITARY FACILITIES TO ANCIENT TEMPLES , MYSTICAL SITES AND MACABRE MUSEUMS.

THE LONG AWAITED FOLLOW UP TO EERIE PLANET HAS FINALLY COME TO FRUITION.

FEATURING CHERNOBYL, WHITBY ABBEY, LOCH NESS, THE INFAMOUS AMITYVILLE HORROR HOUSE AND MANY MORE.

COMPRISED ENTIRELY OF THE AUTHOR'S OWN FULL COLOUR PHOTOGRAPHY AND TRAVEL RECOLLECTIONS OF HIS INVESTIGATIONS OF THESE DARK LOCATIONS. EERIE PLANET SECOND EDITION TAKES YOU ON ANOTHER HISTORICAL JOURNEY OF DARK TOURISM.

Eerie Planet

A Pictorial Study Of Some Of The Darkest Places In History

Marquis H.K.

FIRST EDITION
ALSO AVAILABLE
ON AMAZON FEATURING
THE ABODES OF
ALEISTER CROWLEY,
VLAD THE IMPALER ,
ELIZABETH BATHORY
AND MANY MORE.

AVAILABLE FROM

www.serialpleasures.com and Amazon

www.facebook.com/marquishkauthor

Serial Pleasures

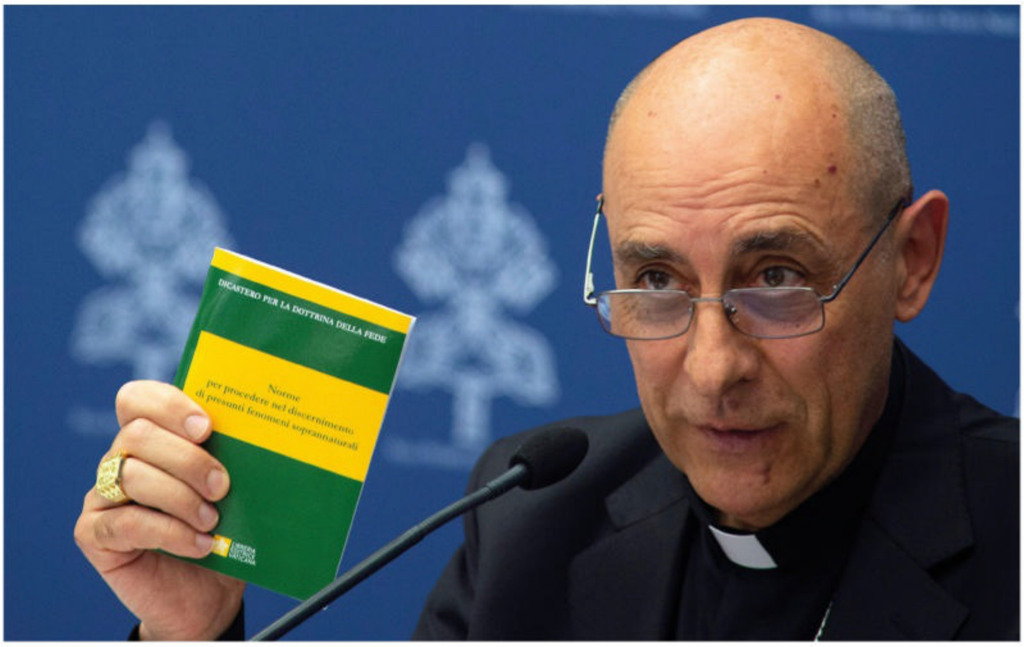
www.facebook.com/otpgraphics

A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

THE VATICAN X-FILES

Catholic Church takes a fresh approach to assessing claims of the supernatural


DICASTERO PER LA DOTTRINA DELLA FEDE
Norme per procedere nel discernimento di presunti fenomeni soprannaturali

ZUMA PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández holds up a copy of the new Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena on 17 May 2024.

The Catholic Church has always tried to keep a tight grasp on decisions regarding which visions, weeping statues, stigmata, levitations, incorrupt nuns and so on are approved as miracles and declared *“de supernaturalitate”* (of the supernatural) by the Pope, and which are not. However, the process of discernment by which this is decided typically takes years, and sometimes decades, with only six phenomena being declared officially supernatural since 1950. As a result, there is a major backlog of cases, and this has only got worse in the 21st century as social media has made it possible for news of alleged miracles to travel around the world in minutes. To deal with the problem, the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF), which investigates claims of the supernatural, has issued a new version of its standard operating procedure for handling claims of the miraculous, the *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena*. The previous version dated from 1978 (although was only made public in 2011) and had not been revised since. Published on 17 May, these new *Norms* entirely replace those from 1978 and took effect from 19 May, the date of this year’s Pentecost. The document attempts to both speed up the discernment process and make the outcome clearer. The major change is that discernment will end “not with a declaration of *‘de supernaturalitate’*”, but with one of six different “prudential conclusions” instead. Announcing this change, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the DDF, explained that these conclusions “do not include the possibility of declaring that the phenomenon under discernment is of supernatural origin – that is, affirming with moral certainty that it originates from a decision willed by God in a direct way.” This is not only to enable conclusions to be reached more quickly, but also to “avoid any confusion that belief in these phenomena is obligatory”.

> *The document aims to speed up the process and make the outcome clearer*

The six prudential conclusions show varying degrees of approval and are:

Nihil obstat (Nothing hinders): This is given “Without expressing any certainty about the supernatural authenticity of the phenomenon itself, many signs of the action of the Holy Spirit are acknowledged… and no aspects that are particularly critical or risky have been detected, at least so far”; i.e., it is very likely to be supernatural in the eyes of the Church and they are very happy for the local bishop to encourage devotions and pilgrimages, but they are no longer going to be held to any definitive conclusion about this in case they turn out to be wrong. The *Norms* add that in *Nihil obstat* cases no one can then go on to say that a case is unquestionably supernatural, although the Pope can still authorise “a special procedure in this regard”.

Præ oculis habeatur (It should be kept in mind): Cases where “positive signs are recognised” but where there are also “some aspects of confusion or potential risks”. For cases like this, the Church isn’t too worried if people want to carry out devotions or pilgrimages, but they aren’t going to recommend actively encouraging them, and clergy should be alert to problems that might arise in the future.

Curatur (It is taken care of): This is given when there are serious problems with a miracle, but it has already attracted significant devotion. Essentially it means that the phenomenon is deeply suspect, but trying to stop the congregation venerating it will cause more trouble than it is worth, so they are going to grudgingly put up with it. The *Norms* say, “a ban that could upset the People of God is not

FLIGHT TO FREEDOM
Justice for detained Indian spy pigeon
PAGE 7

WORLD'S OLDEST EGG
And other surprising discovereies
PAGE 12

PICK UP A PENGUIN?
Guillemots cause more Euro-confusion
PAGE 22

Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede

VATICAN NEWS

ABOVE: The Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which investgates claims of the supernatural. **BELOW**: The new guidelines will allow the Vatican to act more quickly to shut down 'fake' miracles like the Trevignano Romano 'weeping BVM'.

recommended”.

Sub mandato (Requires special vigilance): For when there isn’t a problem with the phenomenon itself but there are people involved “who are misusing it” either for profit, for immoral acts, or for some other personal gain. This requires Church authorities to intervene directly to end the problematic use of a religious phenomenon.

Prohibetur et obstruatur (it is forbidden and obstructed): Essentially the “kill it – kill it with fire!” ruling for when a supernatural event conflicts with Church doctrine. Bishops have to declare that devotion is not allowed and explain in detail the reasons why.

Declaratio de non supernaturalitate (It is declared not supernatural): Fake; for cases where the experiencer admits lying or “credible witnesses” provide proof of falsity.

An important caveat to all this, Fernandez explained, is that the Church still recognises that the Holy Spirit can act “in the midst of” alleged supernatural events, which, he said, “clarifies that even if the event itself is not declared to be of supernatural origin, there is still a recognition of the signs of the Holy Spirit’s supernatural action in the midst of what is occurring,” which could be seen as the Holy See attempting to have its cake and eat it. The new *Norms* do, though, cement the role of science in the discernment process and explicitly reference using scientific tests on alleged “tears” or “blood”, explaining that the “aim of this investigation is to reach a scientific, doctrinal, and canonical assessment of the objects to aid in the subsequent evaluation.”

This new approach to the supernatural by the Holy See will enable the status of alleged miracles that have sat in limbo for decades to be settled more swiftly, and allow obvious grifts like the Trevignano Romano “weeping virgin” (**FT432:8-9**) to be shut down faster. It also removes the burden of deciding whether phenomena are unambiguously supernatural, something that contributed massively to the paralysis of the previous system. While some might see this as an abdication of responsibility on the part of the Catholic Church and a lessening of its authority, the new *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena* constitute a fairly good framework for dealing with miracles and are probably as rational as could be expected from a modern religious institution. *catholicherald.co.uk; sharonahill.com, 17 May 2024.*

FACEBOOK

EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

GEORGIA MEN PLOTTED FOR 'LARGE PYTHON' TO EAT CHILD BEFORE BLOWING UP MOM'S HOME: AUTHORITIES

toofab.com, 8 Mar 2024.

Octopus cannibalism among fears for pioneer cephalopod farm

euronews.com, 9 April 2024.

DEVON HORSE WHISPERER MURDERED HUSBAND AFTER CHAT ABOUT POO

cornwalllive.com, 22 Mar 2024

Aristocrats evict sex therapist who moved into their Grade II listed house with 50 farmyard animals

D.Telegraph, 2 June 2023.

SIDELINES

FRANKENSHEEP

Arthur "Jack" Schubarth, 80, a Montana rancher, fell afoul of US wildlife laws with his plan to let paying customers hunt "massive hybrid sheep" on his property. He created the creatures by importing tissue from the giant Marco Polo sheep of Kyrgyzstan, getting a lab to create cloned embryos from it, then implanting them into ewes on his ranch. This resulted in a single, pure genetic male Marco Polo sheep. Next, Schubarth used this animal's semen to impregnate local sheep to produce the hybrids he turned loose to be shot by trophy hunters, who appreciated their giant horns. *yahoo.com/tech, 13 Mar 2024.*

TOSS UP

To test whether both sides of a coin really do have equal chance of coming up when tossed, researchers at the University of Amsterdam got students to flip coins from 46 different currencies. After several intensive 12-hour days of tossing, during which participants were given regular shoulder massages, 350,757 coin tosses were carried out and it was discovered that the face that was upwards at the start of the toss won 50.8 percent of the time. This was not enough to be statistically significant, so researchers concluded that the chance of either face winning really was equal. "It's fun to do some stupid stuff from time to time," said researcher Frantisek Bartos. *S.Telegraph [Sydney], 29 Oct 2023.*

LOTTA BOTTLE

Researchers from Copenhagen University have named a new South American beetle species they discovered *Loncovilius carlsbergi* after the city's famous brewers because it has a penis shaped like a bottle opener. The "unique shape" of the insect's genitals "stood out" they said. A bottle opener inspired by the beetle will be available to buy. *Metro, 15 Nov 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL ODDITIES

Radioactive wolves, delete-happy dogs and justice for 'spy pigeon'

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: One of the wolves living in the Chernobyl exclusion zone where they have evolved alterered immune systems.

RADIOACTIVE CANCER WOLVES

Since 2014 Cara Love, an evolutionary biologist and ecotoxicologist from Princeton University, has been carrying out research on the wolf population living in the 1,000 square mile (2,600 km^2) exclusion zone around the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine. Using radio collars to track the animals, she was able to make "real-time measurements of where [the wolves] are and how much [radiation] they are exposed to".

She discovered that they were receiving over 11.28 millirems of radiation every day, more than six times the safe limit for humans. She also found that the wolves had evolved altered immune systems and that their DNA had changed significantly, developing areas resistant to increased cancer risk, enabling them to survive and thrive in the extreme environment of the exclusion zone. Love described the finding as "most promising" and hoped it could contribute to cancer prevention in humans. *standard.co.uk, 9 Feb 2024.*

> *The wolves' DNA had developed areas resistant to cancer risk*

CANINE LIT CRIT

Celebrated young adult author Dame Jaqueline Wilson narrowly escaped disaster when writing a recent novel. The book, *The Magic Faraway Tree: A Christmas Adventure*, based on the classic Enid Blyton tales, was almost complete when Wilson agreed to dog-sit a friend's pets, a pug and a Jack Russell. "I was being mad enough to try to type on a computer where they could get at me," said Wilson. "This seems unbelievable, but it happened: one dog pressed a button that said on it 'delete' and the other pressed 'delete all'. My actual, almost-finished manuscript disappeared entirely." Wilson and her partner Trish Beswick attempted to get the manuscript back, but "each time we tried to retrieve it, we were making it harder and harder," she said. In the end, they needed an IT expert, Gary Freemantle, to rescue the missing text. "God bless Gary – within half an hour he had got it back for me," said Wilson, who gave him a dedication in the finished book. Commenting on the near-miss, Wilson, who is an ambassador for the Battersea Dogs Home, said: "Never type whilst on the sofa where the dogs can reach the laptop." *telegraph.co.uk, 24 Mar 2024.*

TERRIFYING TERRIER

Police were called to a home in Herne, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, by neighbours bothered by incessant barking. Arriving at the property, officers could hear someone groaning inside, so broke down the door. In the flat, they found a small dog, and a 66-year-old man in a critical condition, bleeding heavily from a wound in his groin. Rushed to hospital, the man was put in an artificial coma while police searched unsuccessfully for his severed genitals and tried to work out what had happened. "We hope we can interview him soon," said a police spokesperson. "One hypothesis, of course, is that the dog, which is about the size of a Jack Russell terrier, bit off the penis and ate it. The wound

ABOVE: Chief Medical Superintendent Colonel Dr B B Kulkarni prepares to release the detained pigeon, now cleared of any wrongdoing. **BELOW:** Ariel, doing well post-op.

could also be a bite wound. But it's also possibly a sex accident or a crime." Unsure of the dog's guilt, the police said they were "looking for leads". *metro.co.uk, 29 Feb 2024.*

STOP THE PIGEON!

Eight months after capturing a pigeon they suspected of being a spy, Indian police have cleared the bird of any wrongdoing and released it. The bird had been detained near the port in Mumbai after police spotted that it had two rings on its legs with words in Chinese on them, which made them suspect it was being used for espionage. They took it to the Bai Sakarbai Dinshaw Petit Hospital for Animals where it was kept while police completed their investigation. It was found that the bird was in fact an open water racing pigeon from Taiwan that had lost its way and ended up in India.

Indian police have form when it comes to arresting pigeons. They held a pigeon belonging to a Pakistani fisherman for some weeks in 2020 fearing it was a spy after it was captured in the contested territory of Kashmir, and in 2016 a carrier pigeon was taken into custody when police found it had a note that threatened Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi about its person (both **FT396:24**). For more suspected spy birds, see **FT308:4-5, 309:12, 341:22**. *irishexaminer.com, 1 Feb 2024.*

LEGS 11

Last September, an 11-week-old spaniel puppy was found abandoned in the car park of a Pembrokeshire branch of the B&M Bargains discount chain. The dog was undernourished and in distress and was also found to have six legs. She was taken in by Greenacres Rescue near Haverfordwest, and named Ariel after the character in Disney's *Little Mermaid* because her partially fused extra back legs resembled a mermaid's tail. Centre manager Mikey Lawlor, 42, said: "The vet who initially assessed Ariel noted that, in addition to her two surplus back legs, she also had an additional vulva." A CT scan also showed she only had one kidney and that due to having two hip joints on one side, her pelvis had not fully formed. This meant that there was a risk she might lose one of her functioning legs as well as the extra ones if vets tried to remove those. However, they decided to go ahead and remove the extra limbs. "There were two procedures which lasted about two hours, but both went fine," said Lawlor. "The next day she was up, walking around and eating and drinking." Ariel has now been discharged into the care of a foster family while permanent owners are sought. *BBC News, 20 Jan 2024.*

GREENACRES RESCUE

ORCA TROUBLE

Off the coast of Gibraltar, the local "Gladis" orca pod (**FT435:24, 442:6**) is continuing its offensive against small boats, sinking the yacht *Alboran Cognac* in early May. Various strategies have been employed by sailors in the area to keep the orcas at bay, with limited success, but sperm whales off Western Australia seem to have cracked the problem. Whale watchers on a trip around the Bremer Canyon observed the "Split Tip"' orca pod tackle a group of five sperm whales, one of which appeared to be a juvenile. Orcas sometimes prey on juveniles of larger whale species, splitting them off from their groups, driving them to exhaustion, then drowning them. As the orcas attacked, marine biologist Jennah Tucker was watching the assault: "As we approached, the group of sperm whales appeared distressed and exhausted, huddled in a tight group, poking the tips of their heads out of the water and letting out heaving blows as they tried to regain their breath." The whales attempted to fend off the predators by thrashing their tails. Then, a "large dark bubble rose to the surface amongst the huddle." It turned out that the sperm whales were deploying defensive defecation to drive the orcas off. "The cloud of diarrhoea created when the whale waves its tail through its poo acts to deter predators and in this case, seemed to work," said Tucker, with the orcas breaking off their assault and leaving the whales in peace. *metro.co.uk, 25 Mar 2024.*

SIDELINES

FLORIDA MAN

Thomas Devaney Lane, 61, attracted attention in Indialantic, Florida, by screaming obscenities and making threats. Briefly detained by police, he continued his rant, before leaving the police station and returning to the parking lot of a 7-Eleven store where he declared himself a saint and threatened to destroy civilisation with a vast army of turtles, leading to police detaining him a second time and charging him with disturbing the peace. *foxnews.com, 10 Apr 2019.*

COLOUR BOX

From the end of January until the beginning of March, residents of the Temple Hill area of Dartford in Kent found their Royal Mail postboxes frequently changing colour. Some were painted gold, one got a union jack pattern, another ended up with leopard print. Others were painted to resemble a Drumstick lolly, a Crème Egg and Mr Blobby. Some locals felt this "brightened their day", but others branded it "pure vandalism". The Post Office said, "We are restoring the affected postboxes to their original red," while police charged Danny Whiskin, 33, with criminal damage. *kentonline.co.uk, 12 Mar 2024.*

SHOTGUN WEDDING

Wedding officiant Michael Gardner, of Lancaster County, Nebraska, is facing criminal charges after he decided to get participants' attention at a ceremony by firing a gun in the air. However, as he pulled the gun out, it slipped and fired, shooting a small boy in the shoulder. Fortunately, the weapon was loaded with home-made blanks, so the child was not seriously injured. *D.Mirror, 7 Oct 2023.*

BABY DRIVER

Police in North Yorkshire, responding to a report of a caravan being stolen from the town of Thirsk, spotted it being towed at speed on the M1 motorway by a black BMW X5 with false registration plates. Pulling the vehicle over, officers were stunned to discover the driver was an 11-year-old boy. "Nothing prepared us for finding the schoolboy sat at the wheel," said a police spokesperson. They did, however, go on to charge him with theft, burglary, going equipped for theft, and dangerous driving. *theguardian.com, 8 Mar 2024.*

SIDELINES...

ONLY IN CANADA….

Waterloo, in Ontario, Canada, is being plagued by a mysterious nut bandit. In January a truck containing $70,000 (£40,000) worth of pistachios was spirited away from a business in Wilmot Township; in November another truck full of walnuts had been lifted from nearby Cambridge. Neither has been found. Meanwhile, near Edmonton, it's taxidermy. Someone managed to make off with a 12ft (3.6m) tall taxidermy polar bear weighing 500lb (225kg) from the Lily Lake Resort without anyone noticing. A few months earlier the resort had several stuffed racoons stolen in a break-in. Police do not know if the thefts are related. *baytoday.ca, 25 Jan; BBC News, 1 Feb 2024.*

PREMATURE CREMATION

Mourners at a funeral in Church Stretton, Shropshire, rushed to help undertakers remove the coffin from a hearse on the way to the crematorium after the vehicle caught fire. No one was injured and the coffin was unharmed, but the Mercedes hearse was left a charred wreck after the fire brigade extinguished the inferno. *Metro, 14 Dec 2023.*

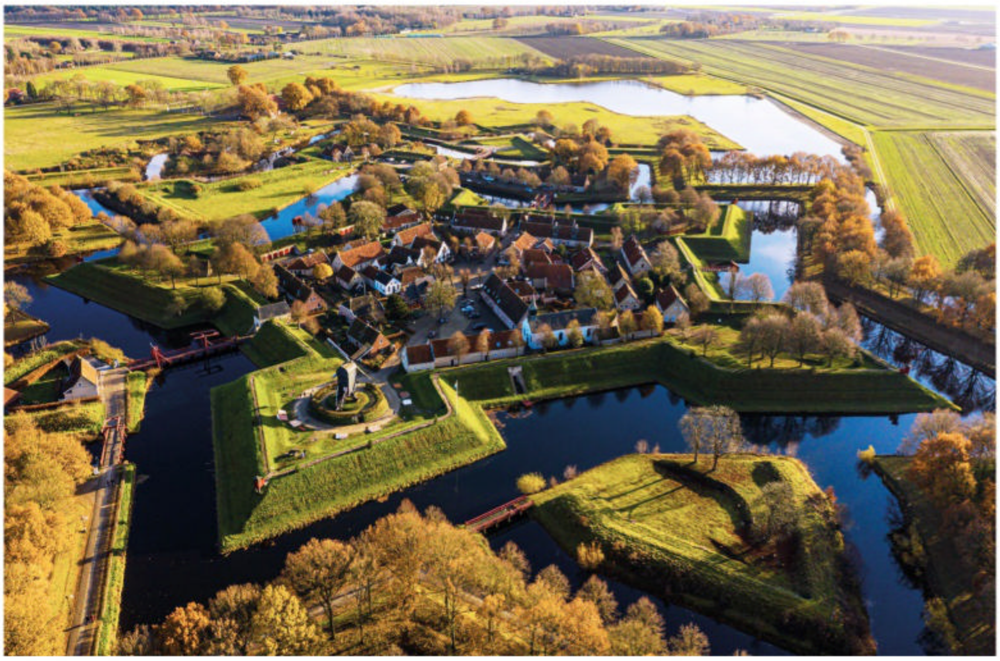
HELLO KITTY

Residents of Fukuyama in Japan have been warned to stay away from any "cat that seems abnormal" after a worker arrived at the Nomura Plating Fukuyama Factory one morning and found footprints leading away from a vat of hexavalent chromium. A check on overnight CCTV revealed a cat fleeing the building after apparently getting into the vat and being soaked in the highly acidic and carcinogenic chemical, which can cause skin irritation, respiratory problems, and blindness. "The incident woke us up to the need to take measures to prevent small animals like cats from sneaking in, which is something we had never anticipated before," said a company spokesperson. *BBC News, 12 Mar 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

STAR FORT STUPIDITY

A new Tartarian twist ignores well documented history

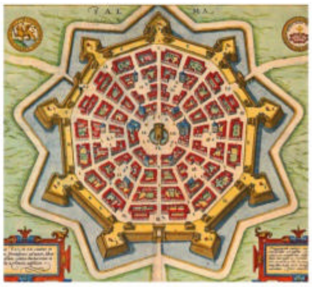


JASPER STENGER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: An aerial view of Fort Bourtange, a star-shaped fort in the Province of Groningen, the Netherlands, completed in 1583.
BELOW: A plan of the town of Palmanova, Italy, built in 1593 as a military outpost and defence against the Ottoman Empire.

For most people, the hundreds of star-shaped bastions that are found worldwide are uncontroversial military installations mostly built between the 16th and 19th centuries. They are generally accepted as being defensive structures responding to the advent of the heavy artillery that had made the mediæval castle redundant. Their squat and bulky structures lack the romance of their predecessors, being brutally functional and usually consisting of stout brick revetments backed by solid packed earth to absorb cannon fire and containing tunnels to shelter the garrison. Their star shapes are a function of the need for firing lines that allow defenders to rake attacking troops with cannon without any blind spots. Or so we have been led to believe; according to advocates of a theory that derives from the wider Tartarian conspiracy, they are nothing of the sort.

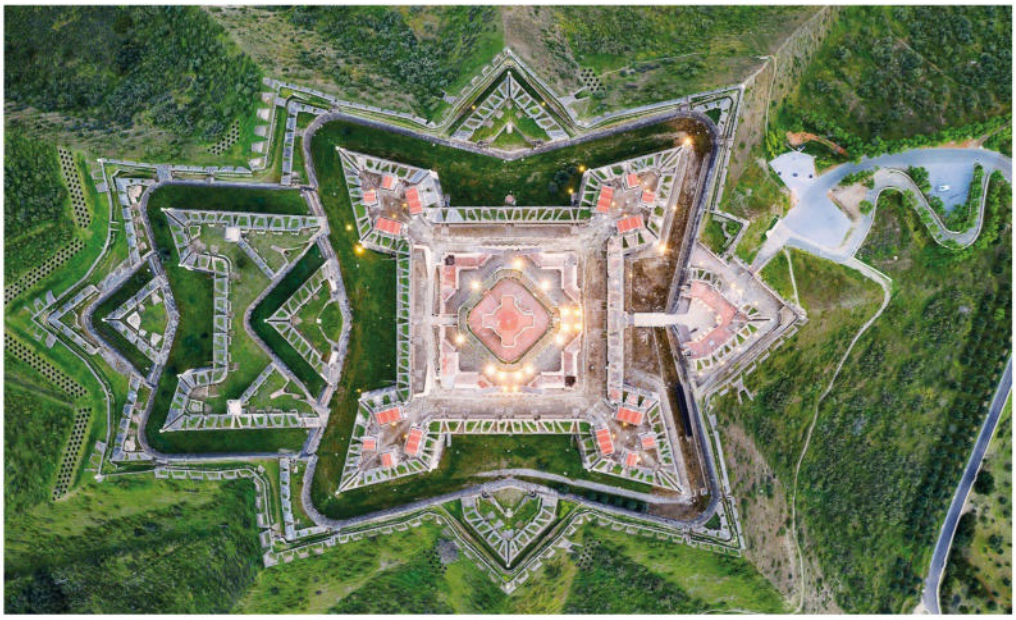
Many consider the structures were free energy generators for a lost civilisation



Tartarians claim that many elaborate buildings from the 19th century and earlier were, in fact, created by the lost Tartarian Empire, inhabited by giants and eventually destroyed by huge mud slides, and that there has since been a massive conspiracy to eradicate their existence from history (see **FT415:27**). The key website for this interpretation of star forts, *starforts.org*, says, "the starforts that remain today, either intact or in ruins, were part of a far larger network of a lost civilisation that spanned pretty much – as far as we can tell – the entire Earth." This is not entirely untrue. Pretty much anywhere touched by Western colonial expansion has star forts because their heyday as defensive structures coincided with the peak of colonialism and they were used to impose military control over colonised territory, but this is not what the Tartarians mean. Star fort conspiracy advocates claim that while star forts may have later been taken over for military use, that is not their origin, and that they may have actually been "grown" as the effort to construct them would be too vast for humans to manage. Cathedrals and castles needed at least as much work, but these do not seem to meet with the same objections, although Tartarians attribute these to the lost race of Tartarian giants.

Many of the contributors to the starforts.org forums consider that the structures were free energy generators for a lost civilisation. This is justified by the similarity of their star shapes to certain waveforms on oscilloscopes, suggesting that they have an organic form that harmonises with nature and enables them to harvest electromagnetic energy from the environment, something which Tesla was supposed to have understood.

One argument for this seems

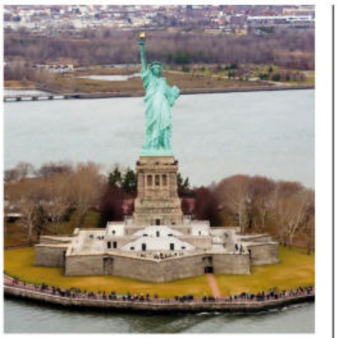


ZOONAR GMBH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: An aerial view of the 18th century Forte Nossa Senhora da Graca in Portugal. **BELOW**: The star-shaped walls of Fort Wood, built as a defence against the British in 1811, eventually formed the base for New York's Statue of Liberty.

to be that the forts are often described as "batteries", which is felt to imply their original use as power sources. "Battery" in the power sense, though, is directly derived from the use of the military use of the word. Originally, an electrical battery involved an array of Leyden jars used together, which reminded their inventors of a "battery of cannons". Believers, though, speculate that if we could only awaken the power of the star forts, we could end poverty, suffering and war, and reverse the climate emergency through the unlimited free energy they would provide.

They are also given mystical significance. One advocate for the mysterious origin of star forts, Chad Stuemke, says: "The symbol of the earthen stars is possibly a connection between worlds, realms, or even dimensions. The surrounding waters can be considered symbolic of the underworlds, the earthen walls symbolic of this realm or the material world, and the shape of a star could of course represent upper worlds or the heavens." Advocates on Reddit, TikTok, and other forums also make much of the moats surrounding many of the forts, seeing them as sacred waterways that connect the outposts of the builders' lost civilisation. Remaining metal structures in the forts, such as cannon traverses, are also recast as unknown objects of potentially mysterious function. The *False History* website, meanwhile, speculates that the star fort shape on the flag of the CTSO defensive alliance, formed by Vladimir Putin and involving Russia and several other former Soviet states, suggests that he is signalling that he is the last defender of the lost civilisation behind star forts.



DON RAMEY LOGAN / CREATIVE COMMONS

Writing for *Atlas Obscura*, Colin Dickey highlights the similarity of the star forts conspiracy to older ancient alien conspiracies. These put forward the implicitly racist suggestion that extinct non-Western civilisations could not have constructed their impressive monuments and instead needed intervention either by aliens, or by Atlanteans of Western origin. The star forts conspiracy turns this round and applies it instead to Western-derived structures. This requires a wilful ignoring of historical evidence and the substitution of a nebulous conspiratorial narrative, as the origin of such structures is well documented. Ancient ruins lacked such detailed evidence, so were tabula rasa for imaginative interpretations, but it is interesting to see Western culture being subjected to the same mystification and denial of agency that has previously been applied to other cultures. This is no doubt helped by the fact that star forts were relatively unsuccessful as fortifications and there are few famous battles that hinged on them. They were expensive and time consuming to build, and their existence led militaries to develop strategies that emphasised speed and mobility to bypass static fortifications, rather than confrontation and siege.

The last gasp of the star fort idea was the French Maginot Line, which consisted of similarly supposedly impregnable bastions, although no longer star-shaped. At the start of WWI, though, Germany simply circumvented the fortifications by invading Belgium, leaving these solid and unromantic structures to be reimagined by the conspiracy-minded a century later. *atlasobscure.com, 15 Apr 2024; chadstuemke.com; starforts.org; reddit.com; falsehistory.net.*

SIDELINES...

FISHY SHOPLIFTER

Police in Fort Meyers, Florida, are hunting a suspect in one of the stranger shoplifting cases they have encountered. Bass Pro fishing tackle shops often have in-store tanks containing game fish, and in the Lee County store a shopper was caught on camera brazenly collecting a fishing net from the store's shelves, then using it to scoop up a 50lb (23kg) tarpon from the store's tank. He then left with the live fish under his arm. *aol.com/news, 22 Dec 2023.*

ZESTY LEMON

While an antique chest was being photographed for auction in Newport, Shropshire, a 2-in (5cm) dried lemon inscribed "Given by Mr P Lu Franchini Nov 4 1739 to Miss E Baxter" was found in one of the drawers. Thought to have been a romantic gift brought from colonial India, it was put in the sale "for a bit of fun" valued at £40 to £60. The chest only fetched £32, but the lemon went for £1,400. Auctioneer David Brettell said it was because "you'll never see an object like this at auction again." *Sun, 30 Jan 2024.*

COWABUNGA!

Police using a helicopter to track a suspect on the run in Devon saw him make a disastrous mistake by taking a short-cut through a field full of cows and their calves to try and dodge officers. The angry animals cornered the man and forced him back out of the field while the chopper cops watched on night vision and arranged for a unit to arrest him at the gate. A police spokesperson explained: "It was a high steaks incident, but the cows moo-ved the suspect out of the field and into the arms of waiting officers." *D.Star, 8 Dec 2023.*

EGGED ON

Pedestrians and cyclists in the Paris suburb of Saint-Maur-des-Fosses are being terrorised by a group they have dubbed the "omelette gang", who have hurled eggs or potatoes at them from a fast-moving beige Citroen. At least a dozen people, mostly women, have been struck by eggs or potatoes thrown from the vehicle. The perpetrators got their name after a commenter on social media said they "just needed a few mushrooms to make a good omelette". *D.Telegraph, 11 Aug 2023.*

SIDELINES...

WASHOUT

Andy Bebbington, an English language teacher in Suzhou, China, decided to take advantage of the Chinese New Year holiday to fly home to see his favourite team, Bolton Wanderers, play. He flew 8,000 miles (12,875km) to attend their League One game in Cambridge, only for the match to be abandoned after nine minutes due to a waterlogged pitch. "I thought, Cambridge in February, what could go wrong? It was just my luck," he said, but added "Worse things can happen." *BBC News, 7 Feb 2024.*

LEGS!

Recycling workers at a plant in Sriracha, Thailand, were horrified to open a shipping container of compressed cardboard that had arrived from the US to find a human leg among the contents, "I thought the bones were white poles," said the operative who found it, "But then I saw the knees and the trainers. I was shocked when I realised they were from a human." The leg had been severed at the knee and still had the foot attached, complete with a black sock and a brown sports shoe with pink laces. Further investigation by police found a complete second leg, wearing a matching sock. *thesun.ie, 21 Dec 2023.*

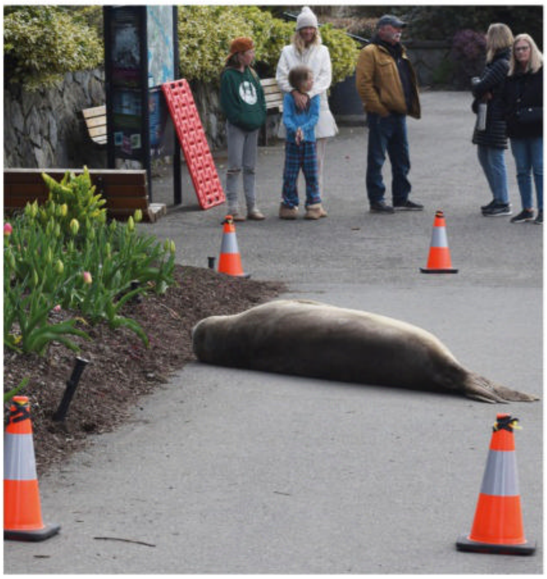
GOOD HAIR DAY

The Nigerian Guinness World Record craze continues unabated, with the latest record set there being for the longest handmade wig. Helen Williams spent 11 days and more than £2,000 creating a giant wig 1,152ft 5in (351.26m) long. She used 1,000 bundles of hair, 12 cans of hair spray, 35 tubes of glue and 6,250 hair clips and describes wininng the record as "one of the best things that has ever happened to me." *<i> 16 Nov 2023.*

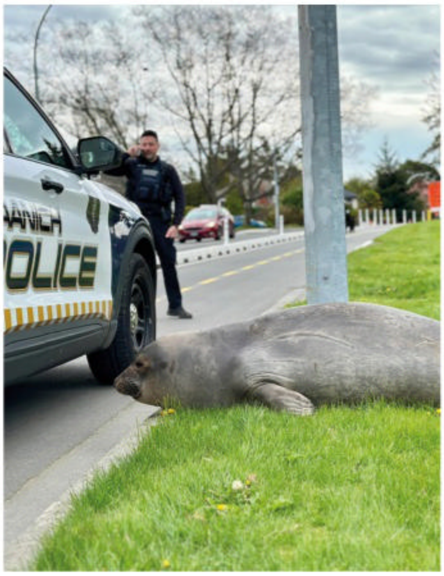
MARTIN ROSS

EMERSON'S TRAVELS

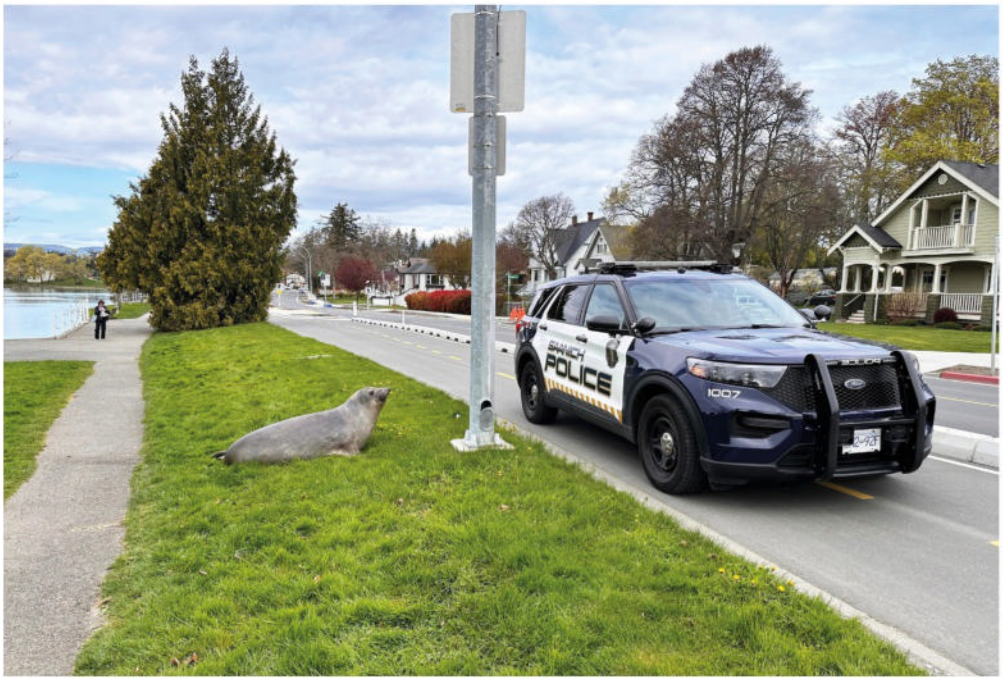
Errant elephant seal refuses to accept forced relocation



DON DENTON / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



DFO CANADA



DFO CANADA

ABOVE: Emerson's visits to Victoria have involved frequent run-ins with local law enforcement and a novel use of traffic cones.

Emerson, a 500lb (227kg) elephant seal, had been causing chaos for some months in Victoria, the state capital of British Colombia, Canada, where he had developed a reputation for ending up in "unusual locations", including flower beds, city parks and busy roads. His presence attracted considerable attention from the public.

"People have approached Emerson to try and pet him, take selfies with him, and on occasion prompted their small children to do the same," the department of fisheries and oceans said. "If public disturbances of the elephant seal continue, someone will get hurt." The public, though, ignored the warning. As a result, the department decided the seal had to go and bundled the animal into a large van and carted him 150 miles (241km) along winding roads to a remote beach "far from human habitation".

A week later, despite being in the middle of a moult, a process that is very taxing for seals and which usually means they stay on the beach, Emerson was back in Victoria. He had swum 126 miles (203km) along the rugged west coast of Vancouver Island back to the city, much to the surprise and exasperation of conservation officials. *theguardian.com, 17 Apr 2024.*

Everything everywhere all at once

DAVID HAMBLING looks at current thinking about the multiverse and its dizzying implications

Parallel universes, once an obscure concept for science fiction geeks, have entered public awareness. This is not from science education but is thanks to the Marvel Cinematic Universe's "Multiverse" and popular movies like *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. These fictional representations often include a handwaving mention of quantum physics as evidence that other universes are real. What do we really know about parallel universes and could they help explain strange phenomena?

The idea of alternate realities is surely as old as humanity. Whenever you are faced with a choice, you end up wondering about the possibilities you missed. What if you had moved to another country, applied for a different job, dated someone different? It is easy to imagine different versions of you living in different worlds.

Such daydreaming gained a potential scientific basis in the early 20th century when researchers found that objects on a subatomic scale did not behave as expected, but acted more like waves than particles. For example, in the double slit experiment, light passes through two narrow openings, and is diffracted. It makes perfectly good sense for light to be a wave, but the weird thing is that even if a single photon – one particle of light – is fired at a double slit, the same thing happens and diffraction occurs. Common sense says one tiny photon must go through one slit or the other, but the experiment shows that it appears to go through *both* at once. The particle seems to be a wave.

If you observe a single photon, the act of observation causes 'collapse of wave function' and it acts like a particle. But until you observe it, the photon is in a strange probabilistic state of being in more than one place. This phenomenon is famously expressed in the thought-experiment of Schrodinger's Cat, a cat in a box which is both alive and dead until the box is opened. As soon as an observer looks inside, the wave function collapses and the cat is fixed in one state or the other.

The most usual explanation is the so-called Copenhagen Interpretation, which says that observation forces a quantum wave into a single state. But in 1957 American physicist Hugh Everett III proposed an alternative, the Many Worlds Interpretation, or MWI. In Everett's version, whenever an observation is made, the universe splits into two: one universe where the cat is alive and another where it is dead.

A FILM FROM DANIELS
EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE
COMING SOON

Memories are leaking over from a parallel universe where things turned out differently

Many Worlds is theoretically tidier than the Copenhagen Interpretation, which has some trouble explaining how the world 'decides' how a quantum event should be resolved. MWI neatly explains quantum phenomena and sidesteps the complexities caused by observation. It does, however, introduce an incredible number of extra universes, because every quantum event in every universe spawns another universe. The number of universes that exist according to MWI has been described as "an uncountably infinite set".

Willam of Ockham, that early English philosopher who said that the simplest explanation is the best and whose maxim was that "Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity" would be appalled at the casual creation of unseen extra universes.

Parallel universes, and in particular the slippages between them, have been put forward as the explanation for curious phenomena. For example, many people have experienced the Mandela effect, common recollection of an event which never happened, such as Nelson Mandela's death in a South African prison in the 1990s (**FT394:32-38**). The suggestion is that memories are leaking over from a parallel universe where things turned out differently.

Another theory says ghosts and other spectral phenomena are leaks from parallel universes. Beings from different realities can dimly perceive each other, but not as solid forms. Similar theories have been proposed for UFOs as craft that travel between universes, hence their ability to appear and disappear mysteriously. Time slips have been suggested as evidence of parallel universes in which time passes slower than in our own. Ending up permanently in a parallel universe might explain some mysterious disappearances, an idea put forward to explain the Bermuda Triangle. Equally, the mysterious appearances that occasionally occur might also be visitors from other universes.

Against such ideas one has to set the notion that in MWI as currently understood there is no interaction between the many worlds, and certainly no transfer of matter. More importantly, this is not even the most popular theory. While there are no good figures, every poll puts the MWI well behind the Copenhagen interpretation, often by around two to one. MWI has had big name supporters like Stephen Hawking, but it seems most physicists do not find the theory convincing.

Intriguingly, it may one day be possible to test whether MWI is valid. This would require placing a macroscopic object – one much bigger than a subatomic particle – in a quantum state. In 2023, researchers put a crystal made of around ten thousand million million (10^16) atoms in a superposition of two quantum states, beating the previous record of just a few thousand atoms. As technology for applications like quantum computing advances, a test of MWI might become feasible.

If everything possible exists somewhere, then every bizarre and improbable possibility is somewhere a reality. The implications are mind-boggling. We are not alone, but exist in a sea of alternate worlds. Many of these will be utterly mundane, differentiated only by the diffraction of a photon on Mars, but in others the Maya Empire discovered and conquered Europe, Earth is populated by highly-evolved, intelligent dinosaurs and "Never Gonna Give You Up" was not a hit.

How will society respond to the idea that every possible choice is acted out somewhere, making free will virtually irrelevant? Faced with such a dizzying mass of universes, most people may retreat to the comfortable mundanity of their own.

ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING digs up the latest discoveries, including a Viking hall and an intact Roman egg

NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL

ABOVE LEFT & CENTRE: Items from the Galloway Hoard. **ABOVE RIGHT:** An Anglo-Saxon find from Rendlesham. **BELOW:** A runestone dedicated to Denmark's Queen Thyra.

VIKING DISCOVERIES

Danish archæologists in Hune, North Jutland, have uncovered a massive Viking-era hall, about 130ft (40m) long and 32ft (10m) wide. The structure had 10 to 12 rectangular oak posts supporting the roof. These types of large halls were prestigious buildings used as a gathering place for political meetings and large guilds. The design is similar to other structures found at castles belonging to Harald Bluetooth, indicating the hall was built during the late Viking age, (AD 850-1000). Nothing like this hall has ever been found before in North Jutland, the northernmost region of Denmark. Bluetooth, who ruled from around 958 to 985, was the first king of unified Denmark and is also credited with conquering Norway. Hune is about 195 miles (314km) northwest of Copenhagen. *kansascity.com, 27 Dec 2023*.

- An analysis of two groups of runestones, dedicated to the first known queen of Denmark, hints at the possibility that Thyra, Harald Bluetooth's mother, may have once been even more beloved than Bluetooth or Thyra's husband, 'Gorm the Old', whose name only features on a single stone. Scholars have credited Thyra's rule with the expansion of the Danevirke fortifications, which succeeded in holding off German invasion. Other than that, however, her story is a bit of a mystery. It's not clear where her family came from, or how she ruled as queen. On one group of memorial stones found in Jelling – the royal seat of the Viking monarchy – Thyra is commemorated as 'Denmark's strength/salvation'. In fact, fewer than 10 runestones that have been found to date are dedicated to women, and four of these seem to be dedicated to Thyra. In recent years, archæologists have confirmed that female Viking warriors fought alongside men. Now, it seems possible that once, they may have been led by a woman, too. *sciencealert.com, 16 Oct 2023*.

> In fact, fewer then 10 runestones are dedicated to women, and four seem to be dedicated to Thyra

GALLOWAY HOARD

Buried around the year 900, a Viking find known as the Galloway Hoard was discovered in 2014 on Church of Scotland land in Dumfries and Galloway by metal detectorist Derek McLennan. Described by the National Museums of Scotland as the "richest, most varied and well-preserved collection of precious and exotic objects" in British history, it contained around 100 items including silver, gold, and jewellery. Soon after the discovery, a row emerged over exactly how the haul would be divided, but this has now been settled out of court. The National Museum of Scotland was able to raise the enormous sum of £1.98million and purchased all of the items from Mr McLennan in 2017. *dailymail.co.uk, 15 Nov 2023*.

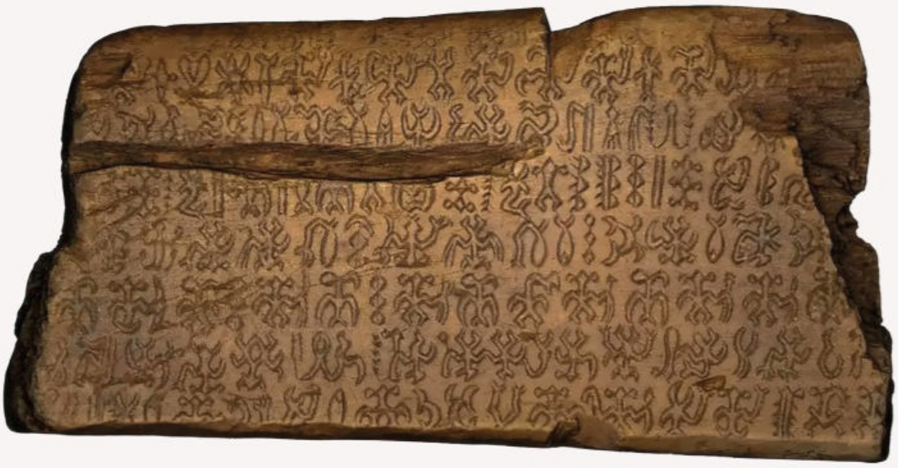
RENDLESHAM PALACE

Over the last few years, an extensive Royal Anglo-Saxon complex has been discovered at Rendlesham, about five miles (8km) from the seventh century Sutton Hoo boat burial in Suffolk, believed to date from the reign of King Raedwald, the first king of the East Angles to convert to Christianity, who died in AD 625. Four skilled, legal detectorists surveyed the site at least twice between 2009 and 2014, bagging more than 100,000 items. Evidence suggests it was the "king's village" at "Rendlaesham", referred to by Bede in his book *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. "We assume they had a pantheon of gods, and we believe an individual chose to align themselves with a particular god or demi-god," said Professor Chris Scull. "One of the things Bede says is that Raedwald backslides after his conversion to Christianity and kept altars to Christ and to other pre-Christian gods – in their world view Christ may been just another powerful god among many."

Prof Scull said that, as well as a wider settlement of little family farms, there was "an elite compound", which covered between 12 to 15ha (29 to 37 acres). It was demarcated by a boundary ditch which enclosed an array of timber buildings – a great hall or halls, the possible "cult house" or temple, and other structures such as stables and craft workshops. This "possible" Anglo-Saxon temple is one of only two found in England, with the other discovered at Yeavering, Northumbria.

Rendlesham was a place of periodic royal residence for 150 years, between AD 570

OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGY


INSCRIBE ERC PROJECT / SILVIA FERRARA

ABOVE LEFT: The world's oldest intact Roman chicken's egg, found during a dig in Aylesbury. **ABOVE RIGHT**: An example of rongorongo script from the island of Rapa Nui.

and 720, from which a major province of the East Anglian kingdom was ruled. The site played a crucial role in encouraging the use of coinage as money; some of the earliest English gold coins, struck from the mid-7th century, have been found there, and possibly minted there. The excavations revealed remains of food preparation and feasting that showed the consumption of vast quantities of meat – mainly beef and pork – and dress jewellery, personal items, fragments of glass drinking vessels and pottery. "Rendlesham was the social and administrative heart of the living society, while Sutton Hoo was the relatively short-lived burial ground where some of the Rendlesham ruling family were buried," said Prof Scull. *BBC News, 3 Dec 2023.*

MASSIVE TSUNAMI?

About 8,200 years ago, an underwater landslide known as the Storegga slide near Norway triggered a tsunami that engulfed parts of northern Europe. Around the same time, there was a massive dip in Britain's population. Did this disaster contribute to the population decline, or were other factors at play? A cold period coincided with the tsunami so it was unclear which event had a greater impact.

Based on computer simulations, researchers conclude that the tsunami could have wiped out a significant portion of the population at Howick, Northumberland. They recently published their findings in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Quaternary Science.* Evidence of the Storegga tsunami has been found in Norway, England, Denmark, Greenland, and Scotland, including the Shetland Islands. Around the mainland of the UK, waves may have reached 10ft to 20ft (3-6m). The story is in the sediment deposits from lakes, lagoons, and other bodies of water that formed during the tsunami. The wave eroded sediment on land but also brought in more from the sea. It's possible the huge waves didn't reach Howick at all. The location has sediment that seems to be the result of a sudden event; yet it's coarser than the finer sand found elsewhere attributed to the Storegga waves. Further sedimentary research at Howick could identify whether deposits were produced by the tsunami at this location.

The receding sea that precedes a giant wave may have drawn people to the water to collect stranded shellfish. If that happened, the tsunami could have drowned a significant percentage of the population. The destruction of resources, like hazel trees, could have also led to famine among survivors. For years, scientists thought the Storegga tsunami was a unique event. Recent research, however, found tsunamis hit Shetland 5,000 and 1,500 years ago. That frequency means another one isn't out of the question. There was, of course, the flood that inundated Somerset in 1607, which many researchers now think was caused by a tsunami. *sciencealert.com, 23 Jan 2024.*

UNDECIPHERED SCRIPT

A wooden tablet inscribed with the undeciphered 'rongorongo' script from the Eastern Pacific island Rapa Nui, also called Easter Island, predates the arrival of Europeans there, strengthening the likelihood that the script is one of the few independently invented writing systems. The wood from one of four rongorongo tablets preserved in a collection in Rome has been radiocarbon dated to between 1493 and 1509 – more than 200 years before the first recorded arrival of Europeans on the island in the 1720s, according to new research published in the journal *Scientific Reports*. The wood came from a tree species not native to Rapa Nui; the researchers think it was probably a piece of driftwood.

Rapa Nui, which sits nearly 2,400 miles (3,800km) off the coast of Chile, was settled by humans between AD 1150 and 1280. Although Europeans arrived in the 18th century, they didn't notice the local glyph-based script until 1864, which now exists on only 27 wooden objects, none of which are still on the island. More than 400 different rongorongo glyphs have been recognised among the roughly 15,000 surviving characters, and none correspond to any other known system of writing. The intricate glyphs look completely unlike any European letters, lending further support to the idea that the language was developed independently. "I actually believe that rongorongo is one of the very few independent inventions of writing in human history, like the writing of the Sumerians, the Egyptians and the Chinese," said Rafal Wieczorek, a chemist at the University of Warsaw, who was not involved in the latest study but has investigated other rongorongo tablets. *livescience.com, 10 Feb 2024*.

OLDEST EGG

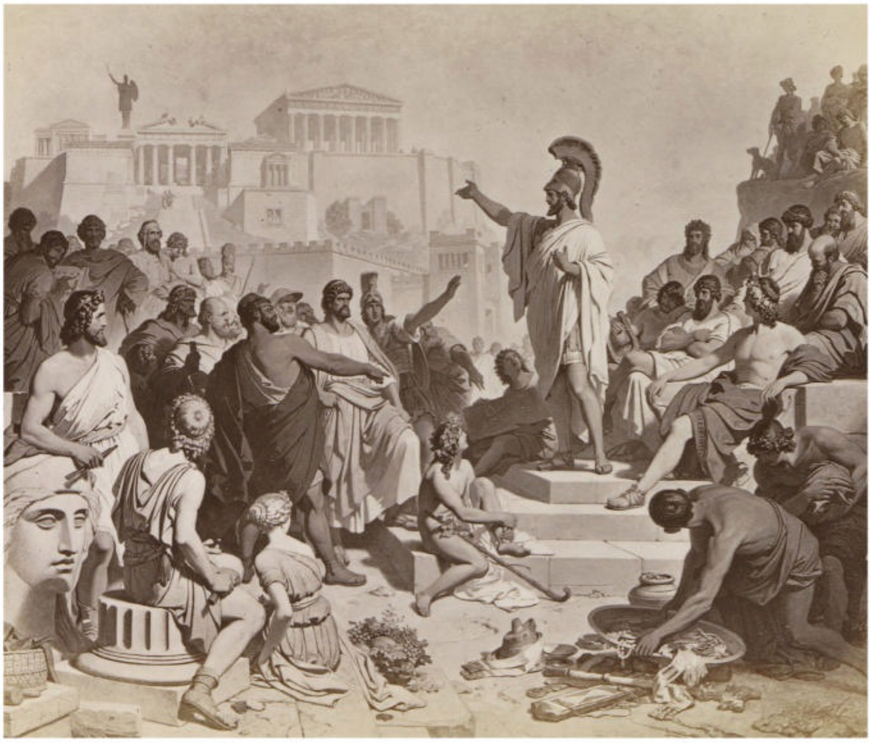
The only intact chicken's egg found from Roman Britain is now thought to be the only one of its type in the world. The egg, which is about 1,700 years old, was found during a dig in Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. Researchers admitted they were "blown away" to find it still contained the yolk and egg white. A micro CT scan – that produces 3D images – revealed the contents of the egg, complete with the air sac. The egg was found with others during a dig that took place between 2007 and 2016. It was the only egg to survive intact, with others breaking during the excavation, releasing a "potent stench".

The egg was taken to London's Natural History Museum, where Douglas Russell, senior curator of the museum's birds' eggs and nests collection, and his colleague Arianna Bernucci were consulted about how to conserve the egg and remove the contents without breaking it. Mr Russell said: "There are older eggs with contents – for example, the [museum] has a series of mummified birds' eggs, probably excavated... from the catacombs of sacred animals at Denderah, Upper Egypt, in 1898 which may be older. However, this is the oldest unintentionally preserved avian egg I have ever seen." *BBC News, 11 Feb 2024.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

298: BORIS'S CLASSICAL PEDIGREE?



ABOVE: Pericles delivering a funeral oration. **BELOW**: Boris – does he fancy himself a modern Pericles?

PIPPA FOWLES / NO10 DOWNING STREET

I have a soft spot for Boris. Wearing my classical hat, I must pay tribute to his Etonian prize-winning Greek verses, his sparkling book on the Romans, and his (albeit losing the audience vote) stalwart performance in that great Greece v. Rome debate (on YouTube) against the redoubtable Mary Beard.

Of course, having reached his apogee with the electoral crushing of Corbyn, Boris' star has dimmed to a nadir. He has been repeatedly flayed in the *Guardian* by Simon Jenkins (also on YouTube). A typical headline reads 'More Demagogue than Demi-God'. Mary Beard in her 'A Don's Life' columns likens him to the infamous Publius Clodius Pulcher, who will conclude this survey.

'Demagogue' is an anglicised version of the Greek noun 'Demagogos' (literally 'leader of the people'.) Originally neutral in sense, it later acquired a pejorative sense (as did 'Tyrant'). In American usage, the word also functions as a verb.

A typical dictionary definition (there are many online) is: "A political leader who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argument." Wikipedia offers a long list of demagogues throughout history. Choose your own: I imagine Adolf Hitler and Donald Trump would top many collections.

Boris fancies himself a modern Pericles. The latter, being upper-crust, is not usually reckoned amongst these ranks. Such classifications were as much governed by class considerations in Athens as in Britain. Of the three Greeks featured here, Cleon was a leather tanner, Hyperbolus an unilluminating maker of lamps, Cleophon of musical instruments.

I covered these characters respectively in *Acta Classica* 11 (1968. 211-14), 14 (1971), 151-6, and 17 (1974), 35-47 – available online. For a valuable inventory, see MI Finlay, 'Athenian Demagogues', *Past and Present* 21 (1962), 3-24.

Just as Boris is now the butt of biographers and political commentators, these Athenians were flayed by the stage comic writers of their day. Pericles (as seen) was and is differently treated from the others, but did not get off scot-free, being (e.g.) mocked as 'the Olympian' and 'Squill-Head' and indirectly attacked through the brutal onslaughts on his blue-stocking consort Aspasia – see various websites for such attacks on Carrie Johnson; she has been likened to Lady Macbeth and Marie Antoinette, and ridiculed for gold-buttoned red jackets.

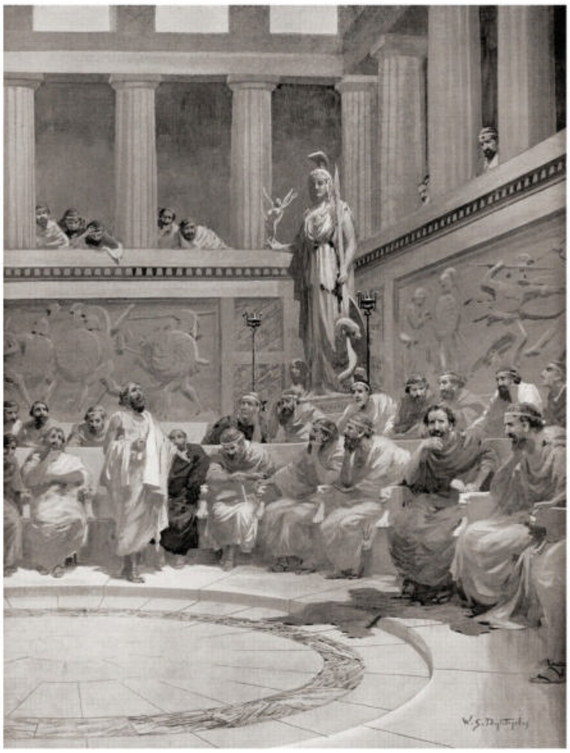
Supreme example of the Athenian attacks is Aristophanes's play *Knights* in which Cleon is portrayed as the 'Paphlagonian' ('Blusterer' – shades of Neil Kinnock 'the Welsh Windbag') duper of Demos ('the People'), until dislodged by the even more unscrupulous Hallantopole ('Sausage-Seller' or 'Hot Dog Vendor'). This comedy was partly 'payback', Cleon having previously prosecuted Aristophanes over an earlier play. There were stories that the mask-makers refused accurately to caricature Cleon's actual face, and that actors were so terrified of taking the role that Aristophanes had to do it himself.

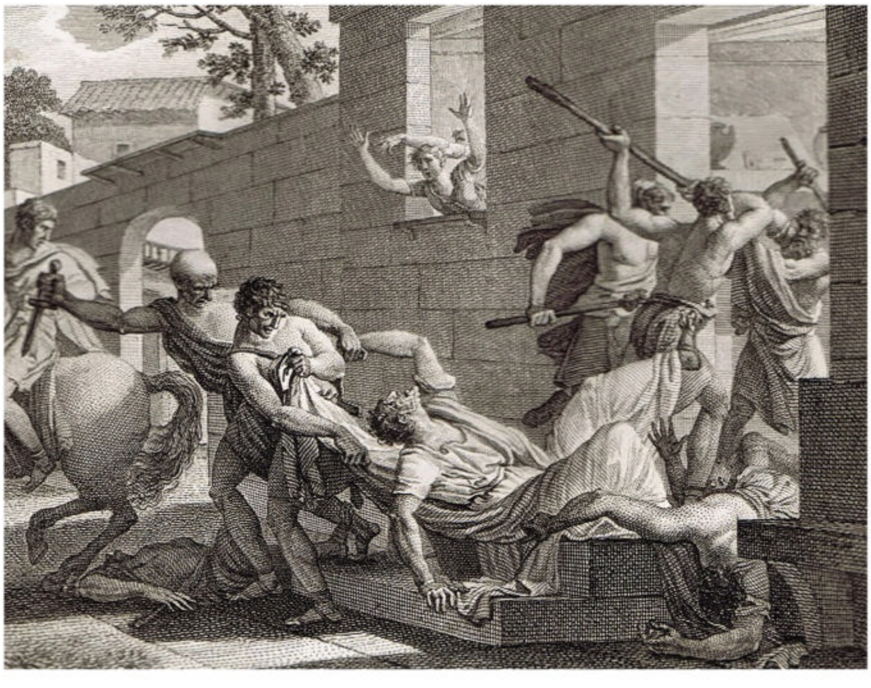
These Athenian dramaturges would have had a field day with Boris's hair and general dishevelment, also with Mrs J's alleged influence over him and personal 'political agenda' – comedy in the 'Carrie On' tradition…?

Cleon is excoriated by Thucydides who dubs him the most violent man in the state, both in word and deed. Other sources comment on his oratorical style, bouncing around and slapping his thigh. With the partial exception of Pericles, the historian had little time for demagogues or indeed democracy itself, stating that the oligarchical coup of 411 produced "the best government Athens ever had in my time."

We first see Cleon arguing for the wholesale slaughter of the inhabitants of Mytilene, a city that had tried to leave the Athenian alliance. This heinous proposal carried the first time, but was rescinded on a second Assembly vote, showing that the people were not altogether in thrall to Cleon.

We next see him denouncing the Athenian generals for not being aggressive enough in their siege of the Spartans at Pylos. Nicias, one of the latter, offered to resign and let him see what he could do. Cleon tried to get out of this, but was forced to accept by the Assembly's





LEFT: The Mytilenian Debate of 427 BC.
BELOW: Clodius, cornered by his enemies and killed in 52 BC.

CLASSIC IMAGE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

shouting at him to go. The cornered demagogue called and promised to win in 20 days, a promise that caused widespread laughter, whilst the ‘more intelligent’ people calculated that either Cleon would be killed (their preference) or Athens would gain a significant victory. For the full story, see Thucydides, bk4 chs26-8. A rough modern comparison would be Boris’s mantra ‘Get Brexit Done’.

Cleon went, and won – almost a prefiguring of Cæsar’s famous *veni vidi vici* (came, saw, conquered). In 422 he was elected one of the generals sent to recapture the town) of Amphipolis (Thucydides’s birthplace). In the critical battle, both Cleon and Spartan general Brasidas were killed. Putting the knife in one last time, the historian claims Cleon “had no intention of standing his ground” – how could he know this? A later source (Diodorus Siculus) says Cleon in fact died bravely. This matter is fully discussed in various online articles.

In his one reference (bk8 ch73) to Hyperbolus, Thucydides claims that nobody cared when he was assassinated because he was “a miserable creature, a thoroughly bad lot and a disgrace to the city”. For their part, two stage comedians wrote complete ridiculing plays about him; he was also a frequent target of Aristophanes.

Around 417, Hyperbolus proposed an Ostracism vote. The loser was exiled for 10 years; his property however was not confiscated. I have always thought this system should be revived. It would be a handy way of getting rid of, say, Nigel Farage.

Hyperbolus was hoping to see either the influential general Nicias or the flamboyant rabble-rouser and notorious man around town Alcibiades given his marching orders. But he was hoisted with his own petard, being himself the loser when the other two persuaded their supporters to scratch his name on their potsherds.

Incidentally, at Syracuse in Sicily, the same procedure was followed, in this case names were scratched on olive leaves – one might think a lot of votes were spoiled by heavy-handed citizens.

Albeit without oyster shells (don’t confuse them with Oyster Cards) or leaves, recent years at Westminster have seen many very similar machinations.

Cleophon was (in)famous for three times persuading the Assembly to reject proposed peace terms with Sparta in the last years of the Peloponnesian War (431-404). The comic dramaturge Plato (*not* the philosopher) devoted an entire play (sadly lost) to him, apparently mocking his supposed Thracian birth and humble poverty-stricken upbringing. Aristophanes in *Frogs* ends by telling him to eff off and fight at home. In a supreme irony, Cleophon was convicted on a charge of evading military service and executed – shades of the similar charges brought against future warmongers Bill Clinton and George ‘Dubya’ Bush.

The most notorious street politician in the late Roman Republic was undoubtedly Publius Clodius Pulcher (90-52 BC). He was really a Claudius, belonging to one of Rome’s oldest aristocratic families. However, in order to qualify as a Tribune of the People which would give him power of veto over Senatorial business, he got himself adopted into a Plebeian family – rather like changing from Smythe to Smith. Nowadays, he’d certainly have spoken in ‘Mockney’, that fake proletarian accent pioneered (it is often said) by Mick Jagger – what would Latin for ‘Innit’ be?

He first made his mark by prosecuting rival demagogue Catiline for incest. Such allegations were common stock in classical forensic oratory; Greeks and Romans had little concept of libel.

Nicely enough, Clodius was himself accused of the same thing by Cicero in a court case. The charge is often dismissed as a baseless smear. But, since his sister Clodia/Claudia was a well-known sexual maverick, there may have been something in it.

(‘Try anything except incest or folk dancing’ – Sir Thomas Beecham)

The next scandal involved Clodius dressing up in women’s clothing to penetrate the rites of the *Bona Dea*, a female-only celebration held in the house of Cæsar, then High Priest. His target was supposedly Cæsar’s wife Pompeia.

Discovered, Clodius was brought to trial, but acquitted by a blatantly rigged and bribed jury. Pompeia, though, was divorced by her priestly husband with the famous phrase “Cæsar’s wife must be above suspicion.”

One of Clodius’s chief coups was to procure the exile (albeit brief) of Cicero. Otherwise, he was largely engaged in street fighting against his rival gang boss Milo, the mayhem being comparable to that in Capone’s Chicago. Eventually, Clodius was cornered by his enemies and killed. His body ended up in one of the Senate’s meeting places which his supporters burned down during the funeral rites.

For the full story, see H White, *Cicero, Clodius and Milo* (New York, 1900)

“No matter how stupid the politicians, the people who elect them are even stupider” – Bertrand Russell: see also Rod Liddle’s catalogue of idiot MPs in the *Sunday Times*, 14 April 2024.

WEIRD OF THE NORTH, REJOICE!

ROB GANDY reports from Weekend North 2024

ROB GANDY

LEFT: The Four WWN Ever-presenters: (left-right) Steve Jones, Glen Vaudrey, Richard Freeman and Rob Gandy.

Weird Weekend North returned to the Rixton-with-Glazebrook Community Hall at the end of April 2024 rather than for its traditional first weekend: someone else had got in first! But as with all previous years, organiser Glen Vaudrey had curated a wide range of presentations about the weird and wonderful. Speakers were a mix of the new and the old, with Steve Jones, Richard Freeman, Glen and this author celebrating having presented at all seven events. As ever, Richard adopted his fez-tooned 'Barry Tadcaster' persona to introduce speakers with bizarre biographies.

Steve opened Saturday's proceedings by highlighting the quirky, fortean side of human nature: death and dissension in the Leeds Dripping Riot of 1865. Eliza Stafford was cook to Henry Chorley, who lived in Park Square, Leeds. He accused her of disposing of two pounds of dripping to a local dressmaker, and pressed for her prosecution for theft. She admitted to disposing of the dripping, but claimed it was a perquisite of the job. She was found guilty and sentenced to one month's imprisonment. On the day of her release several thousand people gathered outside Armley Gaol, but she had already left for her daughter's home in Scarborough. Frustrated, the mob marched to Chorley's house. The ensuing riot resulted in broken windows at the house, and one man was trampled on and later died, with a number of men arrested for riotous conduct.

At WWN2023 Matteo Borrini wowed the audience with his stage magic (see **FT432:14-15**), but this year he returned in his professional guise as a forensic anthropologist. Provocatively, he began by stating "I believe in vampires." His extraordinary presentation then described historical vampire lore and the post mortem changes that led to corpses being misidentified as members of the undead. This included his excavations of mass graves of plague victims in Venice, which revealed the remains of a female 'vampire' with a brick jammed between her jaws to prevent her feeding on plague victims. Responding to questions he outlined his work as a scientific consultant on human decay for the Vatican (see **FT428:40-43**).

Returning to Leeds, Anna Goodridge, Assistant Librarian at Leeds Library, described a ghostly episode in the building in 1884 in which a phantom looked round one of the bookcases, but it appeared its body was *inside* it. The Society for Psychical Research undertook investigations, with descriptions of the event being published in books and magazines. Anna detailed the debates and arguments relating to the case over the years, and delivered anecdotes about ghost-watcher Joe Cooper's ukulele, how 12 students were refused the opportunity to lay the ghost on the night of 31 March/1 April 1960, and her own experience with the mysterious clacking of typewriters in the library basement.

Anna Goodridge described a ghostly episode at Leeds Library

2024
WEIRD WEEKEND
North

Next up was the ever-energetic Bob Fischer, who described his magical childhood adventure on an unknown path to an alternative reality (which was actually a new children's playground in the North Yorkshire town of Yarm, although Bob genuinely believed that he had entered another world. He then took the audience on a fun tour of suburban portals in fiction, from CS Lewis to Alan Garner via Terry Gilliam, Lewis Carroll and many others. He shared a worrying reference from his 1984 diary to "washing his Chopper", but thankfully this turned out to be his bicycle….

Mark Newbrook's detailed analysis of folk linguistics was arguably the most academic presentation at the conference. He described the common mistakes celebrities make in understanding languages, and highlighted the often expressed idea that language is becoming 'worse' over time. There were also confusions between 'language' and 'script', and 'language' and 'speech'. He gave many asides about closed minds and self-appointed non-experts that Charles Fort would have recognised, and even offered a little foray into Soviet plans to communicate with animals and aliens.

WWN would not be WWN without its annual lard-eating competition! This year's winner was Ben Fiddler. However, it was noted that Bob Fischer excused himself at the start, saying incredulously that he thought it must be a joke; competition organiser Richard Freeman does have a strange sense of humour.

A scheduled speaker had dropped out, and so Glen

Vaudrey stepped in to discuss Atland, the Frisian Atlantis of the North Sea. He described a saga of dodgy racist science, fake history and 1970s book sales, and justifiably gave the idea the rigorous panning it deserves. It was such palpable nonsense that even the Nazis rejected the legend, but in spite of this it now enjoys a weird afterlife among some deeply unsavoury characters online, including modern ultranationalists in both Russia and the USA.

The final talk of the day was by ASSAP Chair CJ Romer, who gave us a classic tale of a wrong turn taken in a familiar neighbourhood that led to his having a mysterious encounter with a black barn. As any self-respecting child would then do, he decided to return after lunch and break in, only to find it had completely disappeared. CJ then described the fascinating case of a vanishing and reappearing house that unfolded over several decades in the countryside between Rougham and Bradfield St George in Suffolk. This brought things to a conclusion, when many attendees decided to quickly adjourn to the Black Swan pub before it too disappeared.

Sunday kicked off with the wonderful Claire Davy, who detailed the story of the ghosts of Flight 401. The first part set out the tragedy of how Eastern Airlines Flight 401 crashed in the Everglades with 101 deaths. Some parts of the plane were salvaged and re-used in other aircraft. It was then that things got really strange, with the ghosts of Captain Bob Loft and Flight Engineer Don Repo appearing to (sometimes multiple) witnesses, usually to warn of problems or to see that things had been checked. There was the question of whether some staff had been 'primed' to see the ghosts by what was written in log books and publicity, but there a final exorcism was conducted on one of the affected planes – and the ghosts have never been seen since.

LEFT: Bob Fischer relives his weird childhood. **BELOW LEFT**: The triumphant winner of this year's lard-eating competition.

PHOTOS: ROB GANDY

I was up next, with a talk about 'The Ruskington Horror', using information from my FT articles (**FT401:32-38**, **FT402:38-43**) and highlighted how this short, nondescript stretch of the A15 had somehow become a 'hot-spot' for road ghosts. I gave an overview of ITV *This Morning*'s investigations, and described five cases from the Internet and 17 witness statements I had collected, including writer and broadcaster Charlie Connelly's very peculiar experience (**FT423:42-45**). I discussed potential explanations, including the unlikely involvement of witches and highwaymen, before showing videos of 'The Ruskington Goblin' (**FT405:48**), which everyone agreed were "wholly inconclusive".

Richard Freeman's talk was about Tajikistan's cryptids, the Gul and the Caspian Tiger (**FT373:38-43, 379:55**). One useful source for the former was a book titled *The Soviet Sasquatch*, which covered several decades of Russian hominid research. The latter was last seen in 1970, but there were regular claims of the big cats' survival, with the observation that they come down from the mountains in September to hunt livestock. Some areas in this very mountainous country were quite inaccessible to humans and rich in wildlife and food; these would be prime locations for finding cryptids. Unfortunately, increasing tourism has negatively impacted on potential habitats. Richard described his team's last trip and plans for returning in Autumn 2024.

That the Earth is hollow, or that there are underground realms, is something that has been believed by cultures across the globe since time immemorial. Nathan Jackson took the audience on a voyage through a whole pantheon of such domains – some peaceful and idyllic, others hellish and scary – and described their different denizens. These included the Green Children of Woolpit, Richard Shaver's deros and teros, and dwarfs and elves. He touched on the amazing story of what Admiral Byrd discovered when he travelled to Antarctica. Nathan finished on the serious point that the deepest man-made hole is a 7.6 mile (12km) borehole in Russia, and that the Earth's core apparently spins faster than its surface. We know far less about inner space than we know about outer space!

The annual quiz resulted in an 8 points to 4 victory for Team 1. As usual, it paid to be the runners-up, who received giant fruit-flavoured gummy worms from quizmaster Richard Freeman. The winners received copies of *Trans-Dimensional Zombie Bummers, Vol. 1* (amazingly, there is a sequel!)

The final presentation belonged to Andrew Ross, who would have won the 'best-dressed presenter' award, if there was one. He detailed 'Mistaken ghosts, pranks and Spooky challenges from around County Durham'. This was a refreshingly different take on ghost stories; these were the ones where there wasn't a ghost – they were usually a hoax or a joke. They included: sheets being drawn across lanes using pulleys; a man literally scared to death because he thought he was being followed by a demon (he heard its footsteps keeping time with him, but it was a loose part of his shoe making the noise); a student prank at Durham University involving a 'Mad Professor', which lasted over 100 years; and international cricketers being terrified by Lily the Ghost of Lumley Castle.

The attendance at WWN2024 was an all-time high, with around 100 on the Saturday and 90 on the Sunday. This was despite some regulars not being able to attend because of a clash of dates. Full credit goes to Glen for this success, and he is pleased to announce that WWN2025 will take place on 5 & 6 April 2025. Tickets are already on sale (**www.weirdweekendnorth.com/tickets-**), so book early to avoid disappointment!

I would like to thank Ryan Shirlow for his help with this article.

Troublesome stones

ALAN MURDIE rewatches a 1970s TV ghost story that tapped into the Earth mysteries zeitgeist

ABOVE: *Stigma* was shown in 1977 as part of the BBC's 'Ghost Stories for Christmas'. **BELOW**: Was a witch buried under the old stone on the lawn?

After reading of Welsh mystery monoliths in **FT444:6-7** and a news item "How 'ghosts' can affect your house price" carried in the *Daily Telegraph* money pages for 14 April 2024 (with thanks to Rob Gandy for spotting this), I was driven into rewatching the TV film *Stigma* (1977). This was a drama about a couple who move into a country cottage with a fallen megalith in the garden and one of the BBC's renowned 'Ghost stories for Christmas' series originally broadcast between 1971 and 1979.

I remembered seeing it many years ago (possibly not on its original transmission date of 29 December 1977 since I recollect first being told about it by a school friend) and being rather underwhelmed at the time. It rates as one of the more anæmic contributions to the series, save in that it actually shows a lot of blood. Rewatching it with a hopefully better informed and more tolerant eye, I was rather more impressed. While agreeing with those critics feeling it lacks the dramatic fright value of its predecessors, it was one of two plays in the series not derived from an MR James story and one where most of the action occurs in daylight. Written by scriptwriter Clive Exton (1930-2007), it was set in the year of its transmission with the Voyager space probe, launched in September 1977, expressly mentioned.

Summarising the plot, Katherine and Peter Delgado (Kate Binchy and Peter Bowles) move with their adolescent daughter Verity (Maxine Gordon) into a country home close to some standing stones (recognisable as Avebury, Wiltshire). Their home has the added attraction of a fallen monolith on their lawn, but they want this gone and hire some local workmen to remove it. The first attempt at prising up the stone fails, but something invisible and nasty escapes, initially manifesting as an uncanny gust of wind experienced by Katherine alone. Later, indoors, Katherine begins mysteriously bleeding through her skin

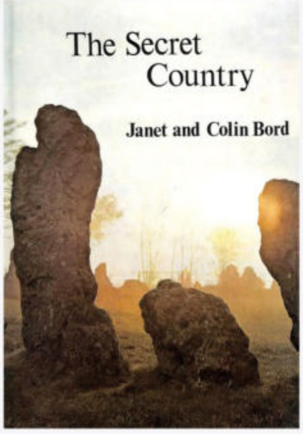
Their home has the added attraction of a fallen monolith on their lawn, but they hire local workmen to remove it

ABOVE: Katharine is found unconscious with the bedsheets soaked in her blood. **BELOW**: *The Secret Country*, a key book in exploring beliefs connected with ancient sites, appeared in 1976.

and struggles desperately to staunch the flow with bandages. After a night of noises and minor poltergeist activity, Peter finds Katherine unconscious with the bedsheets drenched in her blood. He is unable to rouse her, and the local GP and an ambulance are summoned. The doctor arrives first and upon seeing Katherine's condition tells Peter to take her to hospital while he tries saving her. Meanwhile in the garden the returning workmen have brought in a powerful crane and succeed in lifting the troublesome monolith.

It is scarcely necessary to give a spoiler alert, for what follows is so predictable. In the crater left by the stone the workmen find an ancient skeleton. It is pierced through with daggers, one fixed between the ribs in approximately the same anatomical portion where Katherine suffered her bleeding (which proves fatal). Verity briefly talks about the "old religion" and burying witches under stones, declaring, "I read about it in a book."

That's the entire plot of *Stigma*, a blindingly unoriginal ghost story, lacking any other denouement or revelation. It is the archaic idea of haunting that arises from the presence of a skeleton of a person who has suffered an unnatural death or been denied proper burial rites. It dates back at least as far as ancient Athens, recorded in the first century AD in Pliny's *Letters* (vii, 27). A house in the city was long averred to be haunted by sounds of clinking chains and the ghost of an old man appearing with irons on his wrists and ankles. The philosopher Athenodorus rents the house very cheaply, because of its sinister reputation, and sits up late at night, working by the light of his lamp. The noises occur, and the spectre appears. Athenodorus follows it down the passage into the courtyard, where it disappears. Athenodorus marks the spot, and has it dug up the next day. A man's skeleton in irons is found buried. RC Finucane in *Appearances of the Dead* (1982) shows this plot was still being copied 1,400 years later in Spain in 1570.



The idea that hauntings arise from a person denied a proper burial is a motif known across the world (see Ian Wilson, *In Search of Ghosts*, 1995). The idea of spiritual chains forged in life weighing down souls condemned to Purgatory features in pre-Reformation ghost manifestations, and phantom chains wrapped around Jacob Marley when he turned up to warn Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.

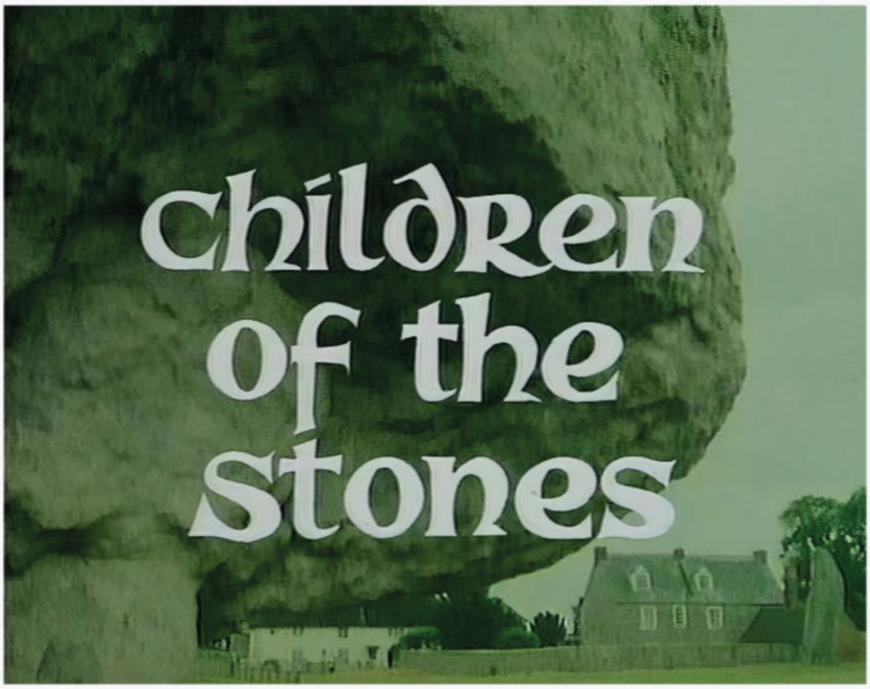
The other and equally ubiquitous motif featured in *Stigma* is the notion that disturbing a grave risks unleashing a haunting.

Others have perceived this short film differently. One critic online for *Horrified Magazine* notes that "*Stigma* is pre-occupied with the bodily… it focuses on Katharine's unexplained bleeding throughout, with multiple close-up shots of blood soaking her clothes and bed sheets or oozing from her naked skin." From this observation further discussion might swiftly head into a modern literary and fashionable discourse about the status of the body, hauntology and the ideas of linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva author of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (*Powers of Horror*, 1982) and thence veer off into a myriad of subjective readings about alienation, symbolism, feminist meanings and post-modern conditions and crises, the type of thing certain academics in the humanities can wax on about endlessly. Such discussions often focus upon contemporary conceptions of the body rather than the disembodied dead and the intangible connections they retain with the material world, but I think any such analysis is unnecessary here.

I don't believe Exton contrived to imbue *Stigma* with abstruse and refined meanings, but was just turning out a straight ghost story containing themes copied from elsewhere. Nonetheless, there is scope here for adopting another of Kristeva's concepts, that of 'intertextuality' – basically how a particular text or story borrows and is influenced by previous texts and stories. So just where did Exton get his ideas for padding out a basic folk motif into a 30-minute drama and the manifestations depicted?

I don't know if Exton ever read of Athenodorus in Pliny's *Letters*; more likely he had absorbed some of the thriving paranormal and Earth Mysteries culture of the mid-1970s, part of what Ronald Hutton in *Triumph of the Moon* (1999) terms the "second great wave of interest in folklore… of the modern period".

The initial appearance in *Stigma* of megaliths at once brings up the antiquarian idea of stone circles as places of bloodthirsty sacrifice and burial and the idea of uncanny influences may have been taken from the HTV series, *Children of the Stones*, which aired at the beginning of 1977 and also utilised the Avebury stones. Regarding written



TOP: *Children of the Stones* also appeared on British TV in 1977 and featured Avebury. **ABOVE**: Clifton Hall, Nottinghamshire, was plagued by unexplained screams and ghostly visitations.

sources, the previous year, 1976, saw the publication of two books that explored old beliefs about such sites: LV Grinsell's *The Folklore of Prehistoric Sites in Britain* and *The Secret Country* by Janet and Colin Bord. Both books list numerous folk stories of adverse consequences flowing from interference with ancient monuments. In particular, the Bords declare: "To disturb an ancient site or to remove an old stone was to invite disaster" in a chapter entitled 'The fate of the desecrators'.

The first phenomenon encountered in the film is when Katherine is struck by a blast of air. Ghostly breezes are known in haunted houses and séances, but the one in *Stigma* is more severe. Grinsell's gazetteer provides recondite examples of storms striking early barrow diggers and those moving menhirs. They suffer high winds, thunderstorms, hauntings and ill-fortune, one of the most dramatic being on the Isle of Arran, where a man opening a prehistoric cairn has his home destroyed by a tornado. Ghostly winds are claimed at other haunted sites: in the 1940s mysterious gusts of wind whirled around Barnwell Castle, Northamptonshire, where it was suspected a body was bricked up (*Haunted East Anglia*, 1974, by Joan Forman) and an air blast powerful enough to knock a customer over was reported at a haunted pub in Hampshire (*Haunted Hampshire*, 1981, by Anthony Brode). Curiously, however, at Avebury where many stones have been destroyed over the centuries, Grinsell remarks that "very little folklore has been noted of this prehistoric complex" – perhaps a good reason to pick it for filming.

In *Stigma* the house is then disturbed by tremors like an earthquake and by poltergeist activity. It was said of the famed 'screaming skull' of Bettiscombe Manor in Dorset (possibly from a prehistoric barrow; see **FT427:29-30**) that if ever "it is carried out of the house, the building is shaken as though by an earthquake" (see *Where Dorset Meets Devon*, 1911, by Francis Bickley).

After the first such episode, Katherine experiences a brief state of mild dissociation, then is physically targeted herself, beginning to bleed copiously. The ghost that draws blood or life from a living person is the stuff of vampire legends. Houses that drip blood or display bloodstains are long-standing in tradition. Reports still occur today, as when businessman Anwar Rashid and his family fled their £3.6 million home at Clifton Hall, Nottinghamshire, in 2008. They had endured eight months of being plagued by unexplained screams echoing down the long corridors and chilling ghostly visitations, with mysterious blood spots that appeared on a baby's quilt proving the last straw (*Daily Mail*, 21 Sept 2008).

Fortunately, cases of ghostly personal injury drawing blood are much rarer. One of the earliest recorded in Britain was that of Sir Osbert Fitzhugh, wounded by a phantom knight at Wandlebury Hill Fort, just outside Cambridge, in the 12th century; once a year, the anniversary of the clash, the wound inflicted by the spectre would mysteriously re-open and bleed again. The title *Stigma* evokes associations with 'stigmatics' in Roman Catholic saintly tradition, individuals who exhibit bleeding supernatural wounds representing those of Christ on the cross (see **FT163:36-40, 306:46-49**). The most famous modern exemplar was Padre Pio, canonised in 2002 (**FT124:18**, **162:34-39**). The Pio phenomena were questioned by Sergio Luzzatto in *Padre Pio: Miracles & Politics in a Secular Age* (2010). Exton may have read of the non-fatal suffering of Eleonore Zugun, (1913-1998) the Romanian poltergeist girl, who suffered bites and scratches observed under test conditions and which ultimately ceased with her first menstrual flow at puberty (**FT347:17**). Mysterious flows of blood are recorded in the literature of hypnotism.

Exton is less likely to have known of experiments in 1936-37 when medium Eileen Garrett was tested regarding a variety of physiological measurements, such as blood pressure, respiration rate and blood samples in her normal state and then when entranced possessed by an entity, her ostensible spirit control 'Uvani'.

Researchers Dr SG Soal and Mollie Goldney found no noticeable differences in responses between the medium's normal state and the supposedly possessed states when differing discarnate entities supposedly occupied the physicality of Mrs Garrett. Yet this was at variance with contemporary results claimed in tests by other researchers, who detected measurable changes in her blood count readings. More recent physiological research into sensitives' skin conductance suggests it may alter between possessed and normal states. (Sources: 'Medical Tests of Trance Mediumship – Spirit Control Alters Even the Medium's Blood', *Psychic News*, 1 Aug 1936; 'Report of a Series of Experiments with Mrs Eileen Garrett Part 1, An Examination into Physiological Changes Alleged to take place during the Trance State' by K Goldney and G Soal in *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 154, 1937). 'The Physiology of Trance Comparing Electro-Dermal Arousal Between Alleged Genuine Spiritualist Trance and Other Dissociative States' (2015) by Chris Connelly, *Paranormal Review* No. 74, Spring 2015, pp.23-24).

The presence of teenage Verity in the script was probably deliberate on Exton's part, a link between adolescence and poltergeists being long postulated from the mid-19th century onwards, and featuring spectacularly in the even bloodier Hollywood cinematic mayhem of *Carrie* (1976). Alternatively, and more whimsically pleasing, the Bords pondered whether poltergeist disturbances might arise from disrupted currents of Earth energies (ancient stones being envisaged as erected on spots where telluric forces concentrate). A concept of geophysical poltergeists occasioned by earthquakes and underground water was promoted by researcher Guy Lambert in the 1950s, but this theory had fallen out of fashion by 1977. Just which of the four fundamental forces in nature, or an entirely new one, might be implicated if this were true, is a question remaining as yet unanswered in Earth mystery circles. The marked clustering of phenomena around individuals or families tends to negate theories of poltergeists being generated by random discharges of natural energies.

ABOVE: Verity and the onion; onions have been used in malign sympathetic magic.

A link between adolescence and poltergeists had been postulated from the mid-19th century onwards

Tying these disparate strands together, psi experiments have embraced attempts at affecting blood cells and biological systems. Parapsychologists W Braud and S Dennis (1989) examined sets of biological psychokinesis data relating to mental influence on electrodermal activity (variations in the electrical activity of the skin) and the rate of hæmolysis (the rate at which blood corpuscles deteriorate). Some significant correlations were found, including greater PK effects appearing on days of increased geomagnetic activity (cited in 'The Relationship Between Local Geomagnetic Activity, Meditation and Psi: Part 1 Literature Review and Theoretical Model' by Serena M Roney-Dougal, Adrian Ryan and David Luke, 2013, *Journal of the SPR*, Vol.77.2, No.911).

It is perhaps superfluous to say that supposedly haunted 'real' witch graves are known around the country, e.g. St Chad's Church, Kirkby (*Liverpool Echo*, 20 Sept 2020), St Nicholas's Churchyard, Great Yarmouth, scene of a mass ghost hunt in 1872 (*Eastern Daily Press*, 28 Aug 2021) and 'Betty Potter's Dip' in Essex. I am sure after watching *Stigma* no one would wish to interfere with one.

Finally, one of the more minor phenomena shown is the spontaneous movement of an onion. Disturbance of onions was reported in the Portland, Oregon, poltergeist outbreak of 1909-1910, in which a basketful of onions was knocked off a table, followed by two cans of condensed milk, a bread bin, a pail containing meat and plates (cited in 'Poltergeists Old and New', 1911, by Sir William Barrett in *Proceedings of the SPR* vol 25, pp.377-412).

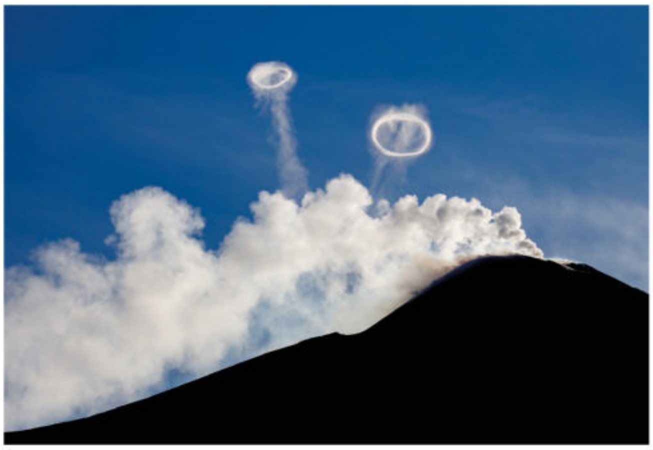
Very near the end of *Stigma*, Verity appears holding the animated onion, but all I could think of by this point was one of the now missing stone 'Hexham Heads' dug up in 1971 (see **FT15:4-5, 59:43, 217:74, 220:74, 294:43-47, 295:44-49, 427:23**). These featured in another alarming domestic haunting from the early 1970s involving Celtic scholar Dr Anne Ross and her teenage daughter, which Exton might also have drawn upon. Onions have been used in harmful sympathetic magic with an example described as "Onion stuck with pins and secured on an iron wire for hanging" preserved at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (Pitt Rivers Museum number: 1917.53.776).

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN rounds up the Euro-weirdness, from gull hunts to yet more penguin misidentifications

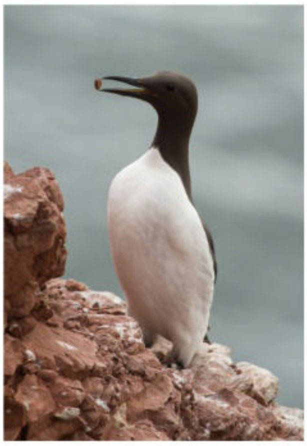
THE BIG SMOKER

Mount Etna on Sicily is one of the most active volcanos of Europe. The last eruption catalogued on Wikipedia was on the morning of 14 August 2023. In February 2024, Etna started to blow smoke rings into the air in massive numbers. The phenomenon was observed and photographed not only by locals, but by many tourists as well. Boris Behncke, a volcanologist of the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology of Catania, stressed that "no volcano on Earth produces so many vapour rings as Etna – we have known this for some time. In 2000, and again from July 2023, the crater Bocca Nuova has released thousands such rings, and continues to do so. In the late afternoon of 2 April, a small vent opened on the north-eastern rim of the southeast crater, which produces ejaculations of incandescent gas. On the next morning it was clear that these resulted in an impressive amount of vapour rings. This activity has been ongoing since. It must have resulted in hundreds if not thousands of these beautiful figures." *Giornale di Sicila, 5 Apr 2024.*



BORIS BEHNCKE

> *Etna started to blow smoke rings in massive numbers*



HOBBYFOTOWIKI / CREATIVE COMMONS

LEFT: Etna blowing smoke rings in February. **BELOW LEFT**: Not a penguin.

PENGUINS IN ASTURIAS

Penguins are a very fortean species of birds – from Ivan T Sanderson's giant penguin in Florida, 1948 (**FT298:68**), or the alleged cave painting of a penguin discovered in Grotte Cosquer, to the sightings of penguins where there should be none, like Pillig in Germany, in July 2020 (**FT399:27**) or Zurich in Switzerland in January 2023 (**FT432:24**). And now Asturias in Spain. People just love penguins! In February 2024, residents of Castrillón in the El Espartal area on the coast of Asturias, in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, began to notice the "surprising phenomenon" of strange birds on the cliffs with "a remarkable resemblance to penguins". The discovery "has created great confusion among the residents of the area. On Salinas beach, the Castrillón City Council reported the discovery of two specimens of '*guirre*', a bird that is often confused with a penguin due to its distinctive physical appearance." An official report says a police patrol appeared on Salinas beach to investigate the sighting of these birds during the early hours of the morning. They confirmed that the penguins were actually common guillemots. The Guillemot Association pointed out that these birds are actually native to the region, and anything but rare, but that their numbers were higher than usual this winter. *lavanguardia.com, 10 Feb 2024.*

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

A most mysterious trial took place on 11 May 2023 at the labour court of Cologne, Germany. It is a long and confused story, but it appears a trial was carried out via an online video meeting, the claimant's lawyer spoke, the defendant said what he had to say, and the judge came to a verdict. Only that all participants – except the judge – cannot even recall that such a trial ever took place. A Frankfort airport worker sued his employer for 70,000 Euros he claimed was owed to him for extra hours and sick days. The claimant's attorney, Asma Hussain-Hämäläinen, and the employer's lawyer, Holger Knapp, logged into the software at 11.15am but could only see and talk to each other on their screens, and saw nothing of the judge. Both lawyers talked for about 45 minutes, and then, as there was no sign of the judge or his two associate judges, they gave up and logged out. Hussain-Hämäläinen then called the labour court in Cologne to ask what had gone wrong, only to learn that the trial had taken place. She was pretty confused. "I just could not believe it. What trial? There was no official start, no end, no motions were made, we did not speak to the presiding judge or the assessors, nor did we hear them. Neither of us even saw them or the courtroom – nothing!" And Knapp confirmed this: "I did not realise that the hearing was supposed to have taken place." They had once seen the judge briefly flash on the monitor but he was gone in a second. However, both lawyers received a long protocol in which Knapp found whole paragraphs he declares he didn't say – and wouldn't have said in any case. Hussain-Hämäläinen was said to have lost her case because "she didn't really substantiate her claim".

The judge, in telling his side of the story, said that he and the two associate judges saw both lawyers on a large monitor. He said he started the trial and the lawyers nodded or shook their heads in response to his questions. He did wonder why the lawyers were so silent, but is sure they also clearly answered some of his questions verbally, even though most were greeted with gestures. Did he not think something was a bit odd? "The plaintiff did not respond even when the chairman spoke to him several times," he noted in the protocol, and when he asked whether the plaintiff would come to Cologne on a subsequent date, he noted "no reaction". He ended the trial after 20 minutes, well before the lawyers themselves left the video conference.

In May 2023, the ruling was officially accepted, as one of the associate judges confirmed that at some point, verbal communication had definitely taken place. Hussain-Hämäläinen brought a bias petition against the judges in July 2023 – and a new judge accepted her claim. "A judgment that was made under the impression of not having had a say could violate the right to be heard," he ruled; especially as even her opponent, the employer's lawyer, confirmed the strange absence of the judges.

How could the judges not notice that the lawyers did not participate in the trial? The Federal Labour Court investigated for five months, but told German judiciary website LTO in November 2023 that "we cannot form a precise picture". The "unusual course of the trial" was recognised, but "all possible means of bringing to light the particulars of the case have been exhausted". It must have been down to a technical error – but how could three expert judges not notice they were talking into the void? Will things improve when AI takes over? *lto.de, 6 Nov 2023.*

SPY VS SPY

When a boat sank in a heavy storm in Lake Maggiore, Italy, on Pentecost Sunday 2023, there were immediate rumours that it had been full of secret agents, four of whom died in the accident (**FT438:21**). First it was claimed it had only been a birthday party on a house boat, but then it was leaked to the press that all aboard had been active or former secret agents. It has now been confirmed that it *was* a spy op. In March 2024, the Italian newspaper *Repubblica* reported on a memorial plaque erected at the site of the accident which confirms that at least two of the people on the boat actually were secret agents. The plaque and two memorials list the names of two Italians, a 53-year-old woman and a 62-year-old man who, as an official document says, "lost their lives on 28 May in the waters of Lago Maggiore when they conducted a sensitive operational activity with allied foreign services." No more information was given. Another victim was a 50-year-old Russian woman, the wife of the boat's owner. The boat was only authorised for 15 passengers, and the skipper will go on trial for negligence. *web.de, 25 March 2024.*

LEFT: The tower of Encantats near Caldes d'Estrac, north of Barcelona.

DEOSRINGAS / CREATIVE COMMONS

EURO-SPOOKS

The Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia*, in a travel piece, mentions the tower of Encantats near Caldes d'Estrac, north of Barcelona. First constructed by an Iberian people, the Laietani, in pre-Roman times, it was in use until the 17th century as a watchtower against Algerian corsairs. Now we are told that "many years ago the people of Caldes were terrified by ghostly apparitions. Every midnight, white figures wandered around the area around the Puig Castellar tower and descended in procession to the town. The locals, convinced that it was a supernatural phenomenon, secluded themselves in their homes." This dated to the time of the Saracens we are told (I assume that still means the 17th century). The Saracens captured the beautiful local Christian girl Leonor who became a slave to their mistress, Fatima. Fatima became ill and Leonor, who had become fond of her, led Fatima to the warm springs of her home village of Caldes. So the Muslims went ashore, but to hide, they staged the ghostly manifestations: "Every night, dressed in white robes and illuminated with lanterns, the Saracens accompanied Fatima to the thermal waters. They were, obviously, the 'ghosts' of the tower. Thanks to the baths, the princess was healed. Leonor, in reward, regained her freedom. And Fatima found love ..." One wonders when the storytellers started to rationalise the apparitions and wove this legend – perhaps in the 19th century? *lavanguardia.com, 3 Feb 2024.*

GULL ATTACKS

The Danish coastal town of Sønderborg says it has had enough of the European herring gull (*Larus argentatus*). The birds attack tourists and steal their fish sandwiches. In addition, the town complains, the gulls are noisy and defecate. "They fish food out of dust bins, rob it from the plates in restaurants and steal eggs and young from smaller birds," the town's website states. Gulls are environmentally useful as they eat carrion and are a kind of natural health police. However, the town has now decided that enough is enough, and will finance a hunt from 1 February until 15 April each year to reduce their numbers. Zoologists think the measure is completely senseless: in Aalborg, also in Denmark, gulls have been hunted since 2000, which has not appreciably reduced their numbers; the city will no longer finance the hunt, which will end in 2026. *sueddeutsche.de, 14 Mar 2024.* For more gulls behaving badly, see **FT331:18-19, 332:6, 334:72** and **384:6-7**.

FISH RAIN

Hundreds of fish emerged from the sea in Gibraltar in January 2024 and invaded the docks of the Mid-Harbour Marina. They left the water in the middle of the night to fall on the walkways. "There were so many that it looked like rain." The reason for this unusual behaviour is not known. *europasur.es, 26 Jan 2024.*

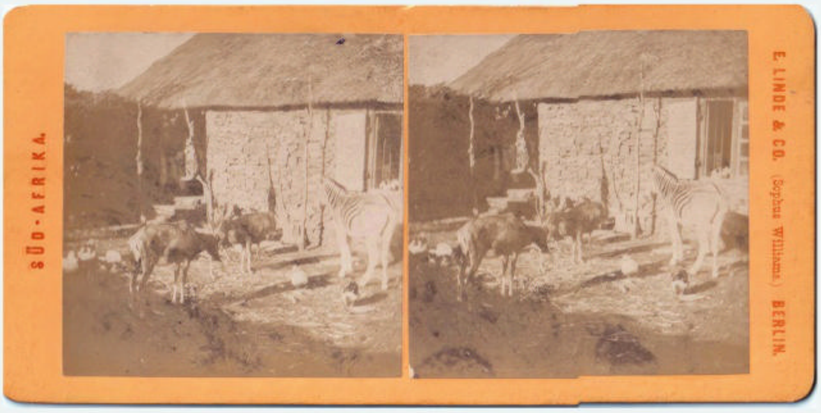
100 YEARS AGO

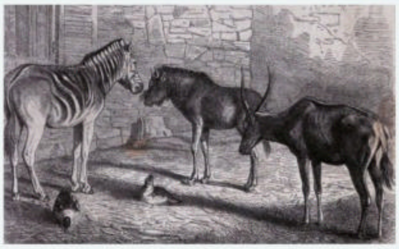
We have an abundance of sea-serpent reports from the English-speaking world, but hardly any from France, Portugal or the Mediterranean. Here is one example, obviously concerning a member of the shark species, caught 100 years ago. The clipping comes from the German language newspaper of Budapest, the *Pester Lloyd*, on 30 June 1924:

"Sea monster or 'sea serpent'?" As was reported to the *Matin* from Marseille… fishermen recently caught a true monster of the sea. The fish that got into their nets weighed 600kg [1,323lb] and is a mix between a shark and a ray. The monster was five meters [16ft] long and had a row of saw-shaped teeth only in its lower jaw. While still in the net, the giant fish offered bitter resistance to the fishermen and injured one of them severely by a blow of its tail fin. The naturalists in Marseille are now examining the monster, which supposedly represents a previously unknown sea beast."

ALIEN ZOO NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

KARL SHUKER peers through his stereoscopic glasses to find a new quagga photo (or two)





ABOVE LEFT: The stereoscopic slide of a quagga bought on eBay by Jasper Hulshoff Pol. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The 1860s photoxylograph produced by Dr Gustav T Fritsch from the slide.

A QUAGGA ON EBAY!

Until very recently, only five photographs were known to exist depicting a living specimen of South Africa's famously partially-striped plains zebra subspecies known as the quagga, which became extinct in 1883 due to over-hunting. In late April 2024, however, news that some additional photos of a live quagga had been rediscovered was published by Branden Holmes on his *Recently Extinct Plants and Animals Database* website. Moreover, unlike all of the previous five photos, these were not of the same quagga mare at London Zoo from 1851 to 1872. Instead, they were of a specimen living at the South African farm of Andrew Hudson Bain, 'Quaggafontein', which had been snapped on 8 April 1864 there by German physician Dr Gustav T Fritsch (1838-1927). Quagga researchers already knew that Fritsch had created a stereoscopic (three-dimensional) magic lantern slide for projection purposes, and although this 3-D slide's fate is now unknown, Fritsch had used it to prepare a mirror-image photoxylograph that does still exist. However, in December 2022 painter Jasper Hulshoff Pol noticed a listing for a slide of a quagga in an 1878 catalogue produced by a Max Fritsch, and he subsequently succeeded in purchasing a copy of this slide on eBay! The slide consisted of two near-identical photos mounted side by side, rather than an actual 3-D photo. But if these two images were viewed together using a stereoscopic viewer, they would yield Fritsch's original 3-D quagga photo. In short, therefore, they actually constitute three separate quagga photos – the two near-identical ones, plus the 3-D version that results from viewing them together stereoscopically.

There is, however, a degree of controversy regarding these rediscovered photos – is the specimen that they depict truly a bona fide quagga? In the past, Fritsch's photoxylograph has been dismissed as depicting a bontequagga (aka Burchell's zebra, a closely-related subspecies to the quagga); but in a 2021 scientific paper, quagga chroniclers Peter Heywood and Keith H Dietrich proposed that due to its limbs' readily-visible lack of striping and its unstriped rump, the South African farm-held animal in question was a genuine quagga. And these lately revealed photos of it do seem to bear out their proposal. Isn't it amazing the discoveries that can be made on eBay?!

https://recentlyextinctspecies.com/articles/fritsch-quagga-photo-rediscovered

A FORMER FOXY FRIEND?

South America's so-called foxes are mis-named, as these native wild dogs are more closely related to wolves and domestic dogs than to the true, Old World foxes. They constitute several different species, some very much alive, others long extinct. And then there is one, *Dusicyon alux*, or Argentina's alux fox for convenience, that although extinct today, died out only recently, around 400 BP (AD 1454-1626), and for mystifying reasons that have yet to be conclusively established. Moreover, another, newly revealed mystery surrounds this enigmatic canid – was it the first (and only) mainland South American fox species to have been domesticated by humans? The reason for this unexpected line of speculation derives from a new and truly remarkable archæological discovery – the remains of an alux fox intentionally buried inside a human grave dating back 1,500 years in a burial site at Cañada Seca, in Patagonia, Argentina. Another alux fox had been found inside an even older human grave almost a decade previously elsewhere in Argentina, at Loma de los Muertos in General Conesa, but what makes the later, Patagonian find so interesting is that whereas the diet of the earlier specimen had not been examined, DNA analysis has shown that the Patagonian specimen had dined with prehistoric hunter gatherers and was part of their camp's inner circle.

Commenting upon this find's extreme rarity, Dr Ophélie Lebrasseur from the University of Oxford opined: "I think it was more than just symbolic; I really do think it was companionship". Also relevant is that the alux fox's closest relative is also nowadays extinct, but became so even more recently, in 1876, after being not only hunted for its fur but also deliberately poisoned by farmers concerned that it might pose a threat to their sheep. Indigenous to the Falkland Islands and traditionally deemed their only native species of land mammal, the so-called Falklands wolf or warrah *D. australis* has lately been considered by some researchers to have been introduced here in domesticated form by human voyagers from South America (worth noting is that the warrah was remarkably tame, wholly unafraid of humans). Also, DNA analyses have revealed that it diverged evolutionarily from the alux fox a mere 16,000 years ago. In short, a creature intimately allied to the alux fox was still alive as recently as the mid-1870s. This leads me to wonder whether, as the alux fox's own historical, mainland extinction remains unresolved, perhaps that is because such an event never actually happened. That is, perhaps a remnant alux fox population still lurks scientifically undetected amid the wildernesses of Argentina, within Patagonia's vast pampas expanses, having retreated there once domestic dogs arrived in South America and supplanted the alux fox in the affections of humans? All currently speculative, of course, but fascinating nonetheless. *www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-68772835; https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.231835*

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

The Havana Syndrome saga rumbles on, with new claims and competing counterclaims

HAVANA SYNDROME [FT431:26]

Attempts to get to the bottom of the long running saga of the “anomalous health incidents” (AHIs), originally known as Havana Syndrome, continue, and they continue to produce contrary and confusing results. AHIs have been experienced by at least 1,000 US and Canadian diplomats and intelligence operatives around the world since 2016. Victims report a variety of symptoms including hearing loss, vertigo, a sense of pressure around the head, odd auditory sensations, headaches, and nausea. Some victims claim to have suffered detectable brain injuries as a result of the incidents. The source is alleged to be a mysterious sonic or microwave weapon, using unverified technology, wielded by unknown and uncatchable agents of an unknown foreign power, believed to be Russia, or perhaps China.

In March, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) released the results of two in-depth five-year investigations into AHIs, which found no significant evidence of MRI-detectable brain injury, nor differences in most clinical measures between AHI victims and a control group. It did, though, acknowledge that the victims did have real continuing debilitating symptoms associated with fatigue, post-traumatic stress, and depression, which may or may not have been caused by an initial incident or because “these individuals have had significant disruption to their lives and continue to have concerns about their health and their future”. The study was widely reported as demonstrating that AHIs had no objective reality, but the report was at pains to say that all it showed was that if there *had* been an initial incident, it had not left detectable traces in victims’ bodies, either as brain damage or any kind of metabolic disruption, saying that: “The researchers note that if the symptoms were caused by some external phenomenon, they are without persistent or detectable patho-physiologic changes.”

LEFT: Vitalii Kovalev, fingered in a CBS *60 Minutes* investigation.

He claimed that they had links to directed energy weapons

Also in March, a joint investigation by the CBS news programme *60 Minutes*, *The Insider*, and *Der Spiegel* drew very different conclusions. They interviewed several new AHI victims, including an active FBI agent from Florida who described a painful and debilitating attack that took place when she was at home, during which, she said, the battery in her phone began to swell until it broke the case. The *60 Minutes* team found a man they believe was a Russian agent who could have been responsible for some of the attacks in the US; Vitalii Kovalev, who had been trained by Russian intelligence in the military use of microelectronics and held a high security clearance before allegedly leaving the service and moving to New York to become a chef. In a suspicious incident, he was involved in a high-speed chase in Florida after police tried to stop his car for speeding. He was only halted after 15 miles by tyre spikes laid in his path. When searched, his car contained a device that could erase a car’s computer data, details of multiple covert bank accounts and a Russian passport. He ended up in jail for 30 months, after which he returned to Russia, joined the military again, and was allegedly killed fighting on the front line in Ukraine. Suspicion remains, though, that this was a cover-up and that he is still alive. Additionally, the report claimed that in Russia, in 2018, investigative reporter Christo Grozev uncovered a Russian intelligence unit which goes by a number, ‘29155’. He revealed that they specialise in covert assassinations and attacks using explosives, poisons, and unconventional technology. He also claimed that they had potential links to directed energy weapons as he found accounting data that noted that an officer of 29155 had received a bonus for work on “potential capabilities of non-lethal acoustic weapons”. Grozev also found evidence that 29155 agents had been present in cities where, and when, AHIs had taken place; particularly a key member named Albert Averyanov, the son of the unit commander, who, it was confirmed, was recognised by an AHI victim as someone they had seen immediately before an attack that took place in Tblisi, Georgia.

While the *60 Minutes* investigation came up with new testimony, suggestive leads and circumstantial evidence, it failed to produce anything even close to conclusive. Social panic researcher Robert Bartholemew gave a scathing rebuttal of the investigation, suggesting that it was no better than the numerous sensationalist TV “paranormal documentaries”. He felt its major flaw was the lack of alternative viewpoints; for example, the existence of well-known non-lethal acoustic weapons, sometimes used for riot control, was not mentioned, meaning that a bonus for working on them does not imply the reality of any alleged Havana Syndrome device. He has previously pointed out the parallels between the kind of insular, highly constrained and stressful environments in which AHI victims operate for extended periods and the kind of situations in which mass psychogenic illness is generated. The symptoms AHI victims report are very similar to those found in other mass psychogenic illness outbreaks, too, where strange paralysis, headaches, nausea, collapse, and other evanescent afflictions frequently figure and occasionally have long term consequences.

The constant interplay of coincidentally timed claim and counterclaim on AHIs suggests there may be some kind of behind-the-scenes conflict about the phenomenon going on in the US Government, but it does seem increasingly likely that Bartholemew will be proved right, and that key senior operatives in sensitive posts crucial to US defence have been falling victim to a mass psychogenic illness. *nih.gov, 18 Mar; cbsnews.com, 31 Mar; skepticalenquirer.org, 4 Apr 2024.*

For previous coverage of Havana Syndrome, see **FT359:22, 360:14, 363:4, 370:26- 27, 382:10-11, 389:26-27, 401:9, 407:21, 411:26, 414:8, 417:28, 426:14, 430:7, 431:26.**

NECROLOG

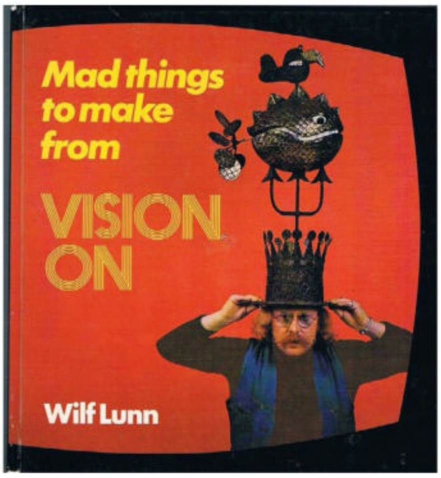
This month, we say goodbye to two once-familiar faces from the televisual landscape of the past – a celebrated conjuror and an eccentric inventor

CHRISTOPHER PILLITZ / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Magician David Berglas. **BELOW:** Eccentric inventor and TV presenter Wilf Lunn.

DAVID BERGLAS

David Berglas was one of the first conjurors to have his own television show, *Meet David Berglas*, first broadcast on the BBC in 1954. He went on to appear in many programmes internationally, to have residencies in Las Vegas and to act as technical consultant on films such as *Octopussy*, Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* and Tim Burton's *Batman*. Berglas was Jewish and born in Berlin, fleeing to England when he was 11 and making his home here for the rest of his life. He spent a period at the end of the war working with the US Army on the denazification of Germany, then initially returned to Bradford to study textiles with the intention of joining the locally based family textile business. However, a chance meeting with noted magician Ken Brooke led to stage magic becoming a major obsession, which he supplemented by studying psychotherapy, and then working as a therapist specialising in medical hypnosis. He turned professional as a magician and illusionist in 1952, but made his name, with a trick in 1953 when he was blindfolded and hooded and driven around London to locate a hidden slipper. He guided the driver to Battersea Park, and once there, took a boat on the lake to find the slipper on an island in the middle. Berglas also completed the Cresta toboggan run at St Moritz, Switzerland, blindfolded – and followed that up by making a piano disappear from a stage at the Toboggan Club of Great Britain's annual gala dinner, a trick achieved with a fake, collapsing piano, skilled distraction, and music played from off-stage. The reputation he gained through these stunts led to his TV offer. He regularly carried out 'Nationwide Psychological Experiments' over radio as well, receiving reactions via listeners writing in, and later hosted regular radio phone-ins. In the 1970s he ran a children's spoon-bending competition for the *Daily Express* at the height of Uri Geller's fame and Geller was later one of the recipients of The David Berglas International Magic Award presented by the charity he founded, The Foundation for Promoting the Art of Magic. Berglas is revered among magicians for coming up with what is known as "The Berglas Effect" – the "Holy Grail" of card magic. This involves someone freely naming any playing card and freely selecting any position in a deck, after which the magician pulls the named card from the specified position in a random deck. Britain's oldest magician's organisation, The British Magical Society, also presents a David Berglas Award. Berglas was a President of the Magic Circle, and they presented him with their prestigious Gold Medal in 2000, given only six times since 1926, and in October 2011, their highest international award, The David Devant. In 1995 he received the Maskelyne Award for outstanding contribution to British magic.

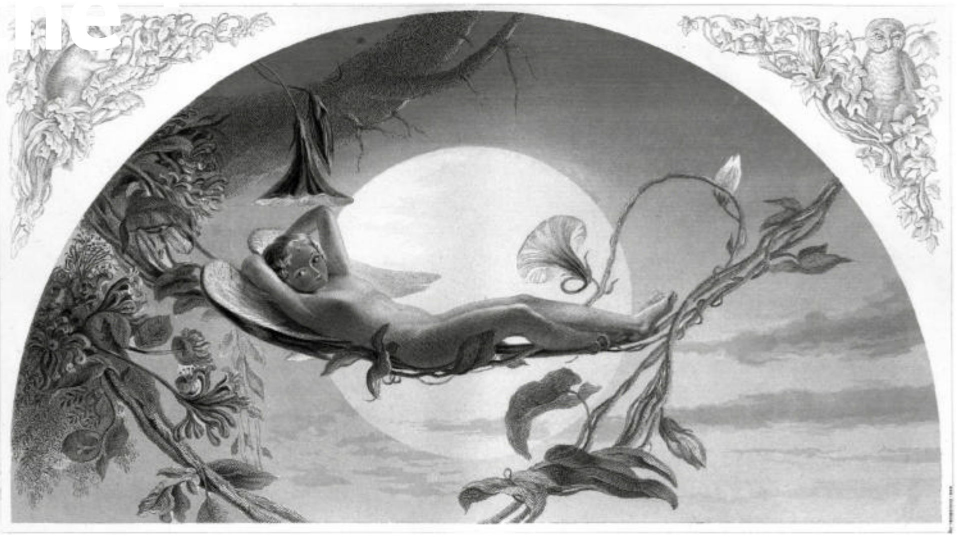


David Gert Heinz Berglas, conjuror and illusionist; born, Berlin, 30 July 1926; died, London, 3 Nov 2023, aged 97.

WILF LUNN

As a boy, Wilf Lunn sent away for fake moustaches until he was able to cultivate his own, a vast, waxed ginger number, that, paired with a pair of large circular specs, gave him an unforgettable public image. He was an inventor, a bicycle enthusiast and an English eccentric of the classic kind. The son of deaf parents – he later claimed to have been "brought up in a cellar by deaf mutes" – Lunn first achieved notice as a regular guest on *Vision On*, the BBC's children's show for the hearing impaired. Here, he would demonstrate his increasingly bizarre and often bicycle-based devices, invented to solve problems that most people had not realised existed. Among these was a humane pigeon-catcher with a large cup into which a cyclist lured unsuspecting birds, equipped with a guano-guard umbrella "to protect the rider against massive retaliatory bombing by the pigeons' friends". Many of his inventions had a mildly grotesque streak to them, such as the duck-catcher. This had a projecting rubber maggot as bait which the user wriggled, attracting ducks that tried to gobble it, at which point two spiked discs slammed together to crush the bird. Certainly unsuitable for children's TV was his "choirboy tuner": Lunn explained, "The bicyclist pulls a lever and these tongs grip the choirboy by the testicles. By varying the pressure you can tune the boy's voice… If you go too far you caponise him." His stage show, *The Huddersfield Novelty Suicide Company*, involved Lunn warning audiences about the Ku Klux Katterpillar and being given a sighting of life after death in the form of Malcolm Maggot. "I once thought of writing to *Stars on Sunday* to ask whether they could use Malcolm Maggot to supply requests from the dead," he said. It would have been interesting to see their reply. Lunn combined inventing with part-time lecturing on visual communications at Huddersfield Polytechnic and during the 1970s expanded his TV repertoire with appearances on *Jigsaw*, *Ask Aspel* and *Jim'll Fix It*. Later, in the 1990s, he became Jonathan Ross's "resident professor" on *Fantastic Facts* and in 2008 he published an autobiography, *My Best Cellar*. With his TV appearances becoming rarer from the late 1980s, he opened the Wiz Bizarre Studio Café in Huddersfield as a showcase for his strange and unlikely contraptions – including a cucumber straightener, a walking submarine and a human cannon, but he continued to carry out whimsical activities, such as exporting a singing Christmas tree to Iceland.

Wilfred Makepeace Lunn, inventor, TV presenter and English eccentric; born, Rastrick, 20 Mar 1942; died, Huddersfield, 13 Dec 2023, aged 81.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

COTTINGLEY CHALLENGE

I have a challenge for any readers with a little time on their hands and a love of old newspapers. At the moment I'm preparing a volume of essays on the Cottingley fairy photographs. This is the episode where a couple of Yorkshire girls confected fairy photographs, which were subsequently published for the first time in *The Strand Magazine* by Arthur Conan Doyle in 1920-1921. The five photographs changed fortean history: they changed the way we see fairies; they changed the way we understand fairies; and they changed the way we view photographic proof of the 'impossible' (see **FT53:48-53, 356:30-35**).

THE FIVE PHOTOGRAPHS CHANGED THE WAY WE VIEW PHOTOGRAPHIC PROOF OF THE 'IMPOSSIBLE'

Six months ago, I would have signed off on everything I've written above. But I'm now convinced that there is an error there. It is untrue to say that the photographs were first published in *Strand*. Why the scepticism? Fiona Maher in her *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Secret of the Cottingley Fairies* usefully prints some notes (dated 14 July 1920) by the theosophist Edward Gardner. Gardner scribbled down the answers to queries he set the Cottingley parents, including this. "What accounts published?" And the answer: "Only one paper". Then in a January 1921 article published in the *Yorkshire Post* we learn that: "One of these prints was reproduced with a few flippant lines of amused comment in a local weekly paper in May".

There is the same basic story, then, six months apart. I don't think the family – the Wright family – would have lied about this: a) because it didn't advance their cause; and b) because it would have been relatively easy to check up on. My guess is that in May (or perhaps April or June) 1920 a Cottingley photograph was published in the Bradford area somewhere. Why care? If we could find that photograph we would have a copy of the print before it was 'retouched' by Doyle's crew. We would perhaps also learn more about the murky background of the first Cottingley photographs.

How difficult would it be to track the missing photo down? For me in Italy it is impossible. For anyone in the UK it would be necessary to go through the originals (in London or Boston Spa) of all relevant papers over three months: if the page had been scanned in the British Newspaper Archive it would already have been found. Yes, it is a lot of print – a dozen titles? But remember, you would be looking for a photograph. Twenty-five years ago when I first wrote a note in *Fortean Times*, I offered readers a Russian dictionary for anyone who could disprove a Euro-Asian conspiracy theory. If anyone manages this time I'll get you a dozen copies of the new Cottingley book, with a place in fairy history thrown in!

Simon Young is the editor of *The Wollaton Gnomes: A Nottingham Fairy Mystery*.

Probing abductions

NIGEL WATSON reports on a new study of alien abductions and Oregon's TwinRay time travellers

LEFT: TwinRay's Shekinah Mah and Sanandaji, now on planet Earth (allegedly) after their numerous jaunts through time and space.

TWINRAY / FACEBOOK

IMPOSSIBLE ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

In what promises to be the first of its kind in terms of methodology, scope and scale, the Archives of the Impossible based at Rice University has announced it is conducting a two-year meta-data research study in collaboration with the John Mack Institute.

Karin Austin, an experiencer who participated in Dr Mack's research, officially became the project manager of the archive in April 2024. Nearly two decades after Mack's untimely death in September 2004, she began working with Jeff Kripal, Rice University's J Newton Rayzor Professor of Religion, and Amanda Focke, Head of Special Collections at Rice University's Woodson Research Center. Together, they collaborated on the transfer and digitisation of the Mack family's donation of Dr Mack's archives. These materials, related to his study of the alien abduction phenomenon, included 150 boxes of books, journals, photographs, slides, reports, meeting notes and letters. Whitley Strieber has also donated a substantial amount of files and letters to the archive.

With the oversight of a multidisciplinary panel of advisors, the project aims to use software programming and AI to extract raw data from within Archives of the Impossible's abduction-related materials in order to better understand the characteristics of the phenomenon.

Austin's encounters, like those reported by many experiencers, began when she was a child, although they largely took place during her mid-twenties. She is not impressed by such psychological concepts as sleep paralysis, fantasy proneness, false memory syndrome and the like, which are often used to "explain" alien abduction experiences. She is quick to point out that some abductees experienced their encounters during full waking consciousness – events that left them with explicit memories which do not require hypnosis to recall. She told me that Mack screened prospective research participants to rule out individuals suffering from psychopathology or those whose narratives might be accounted for by a mundane explanation. His files are full of thousands of eye-witness reports about phenomena that cannot be reconciled within the dominant Western worldview.

Roughly speaking, alien abductions began in the 1960s and continued through to the end of the 20th century. It was in the 1980s and 1990s that the alien abduction phenomenon reached a mainstream audience through the bestselling books of Jaques Valleé, Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, John Mack and Whitley Strieber. Austin observes that they each had their own take on the subject; Valleé had been researching UFOs for decades, horror writer Strieber was an experiencer; historian Jacobs considered it from an anthropocentric viewpoint; artist Hopkins created a space in which abductees could discuss their experiences, and Mack used his expert clinical knowledge and empathy to understand this unique phenomenon.

Austin said abductions seemed to be, in part, related to a project that included the extraction of human gametes for the purpose of creating alien-human hybrid lifeforms. Abductions often exposed experiencers to exotic forms of advanced technology that defied humankind's current understanding of physics. Some events transpired in physical reality, others in altered states of consciousness, and others in some combination of the two.

Another aspect of the abduction phenomenon reported by experiencers included holographic demonstrations of human warfare, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other global catastrophes. In response, many experiencers developed a new worldview defined by a deep sense of interconnection and responsibility for the wellbeing of all life on the planet.

By the early 2000s, the beings gave some indication to experiencers that their hybrid creation programme was complete. Since then, abductions have, for the most part, ceased.

The increase in Intelligence Community whistleblower accounts and the public's renewed interest in UAPs has led Austin to think that it is possible we will, in her own lifetime, obtain a far greater understanding of this phenomenon than previously thought possible; one that will evolve human knowledge about the nature of reality and how the Universe works.

The metadata research study will not verify specific cases but will produce white papers, including statistical analysis and data explication, for scientists and academics who are largely uninformed about the phenomenon. It should be intriguing to see what they find. *news.rice.edu/news/2024/decade-discovery-10-years-rice-universitys-archives-impossible; www.ricethresher.org/article/2023/11/peruse-the-paranormal-at-rices-archives-of-the-impossible; libguides.rice.edu/impossiblearchives; library.rice.edu/places/woodson-research-center-special-collections-archives*

COSMIC CULT

Based in Ashland Oregon, the TwinRay cult is run by Shekinah Mah (formerly the C-list movie actress Mia Terez Deuschle) and an Australian bloke called Sanandaji (formerly Harley Forster). Sanandaji says:

"We have had many encounters, we've sat on councils with different star races from different signets [sic].

"We've assisted in many different ways off planet. We've been on countless ships and had experiences of our physical body going to them, we've travelled back in time. There are different planetary systems that we travel to frequently."

From their time travel they have brought back from the future a device that connects the user to "Cosmic, Galactic, Solar and Earth fields of consciousness and bandwidths." It also helps empty the bank accounts of their followers, and makes us nostalgic for the contactees of the 1950s, who seem far more plausible by comparison. *www.gurumag.com/inside-the-twinray-cult/*

Six types of ambiguity

JENNY RANDLES offers a range of theories about what might be behind alien abductions

To coincide with the new research project into alien abduction claims discussed by Nigel Watson on the previous page, I thought it appropriate to summarise the diverse range of potential explanations for what may be going on during these extraordinary events. So here are six theories that have been considered over the past 60 years. One of them may even be true!

An interesting first thought is that while there were a few rare outliers, abductions were not clearly present from the onset of the UFO mystery immediately after World War II. A decade or more passed before the abduction phenomenon came to be recognised and studied as a distinct aspect of ufology. Which poses a fascinating question – was the abduction experience really unrelated to the UFO phenomenon and linked to it only by cultural presumption?

ALL IN THE MIND is the most down-to-earth assessment. This assumes that a witness simply imagines or dreams an encounter, and would fit the many claimed abductions that start in the bedroom and involve ‘beaming up’ the witness. He or she may have a lucid dream that blends reality and imagination so that the witness subsequently cannot differentiate the two. Something similar happens with sleep paralysis, where dream imagery intrudes into waking life. The event is interpreted as a literal kidnap from their bed. In truth they were still there, but the altered state of consciousness kidded their mind into accepting dream images as real. This may explain why a series of experiments in the 1990s seemed to establish that abduction experiences are not related to fantasy proneness, as might be expected.

SUPERHUMANS is an idea that seeks to explain why those who have multiple alien contacts also tend to have a history of other psychic events, such as seeing ghosts or precognition. Regardless of whether such events are themselves real, it points towards a factor within the brain that might create unusual pathways of experience that only a few people have. The Oz Factor – the state that often precedes close encounters, and in which time and space almost freeze – may be a sign of a change in consciousness that opens the door to these phenomena.

Perhaps we see these beings in the way that the more intelligent animals on Earth see us

Interestingly Dr Kenneth Ring, one of the pioneers of research into near-death experiences (NDEs) – when people on the verge of death claim to have visited a kind of afterlife – noticed the similarities in both types of case. The bright light that the NDE experient is pulled towards has an intriguing parallel with the ‘tractor beam’ that sucks an abductee up to a UFO. Are these a single phenomenon of human consciousness, with customised explanations tacked on later, depending on whether the start point is proximity to death or perception of a scary unknown?

MIND SCRAMBLING assumes the UFO event is real, perhaps involving some kind of plasma that is perceived at a distance by other witnesses as just a ball of light. But at close quarters its energy physically interacts with the witness and distorts their perception of what is going on. Experiments have shown that this could result in some of the phenomena reported during a close encounter. For example, the sensation of heat or tingling could be real, but caused by proximity to energy, not the intervention of aliens.

Indeed if UFOs are a form of natural UAP, then its energy, creating physiological effects, heat transfer and inevitable stress, could result in the mind seeking and creating an explanation for the experience – perhaps using stock science-fiction imagery to do so.

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS is a rather more exotic option best left until the more reductive possibilities prove not to be supported by the evidence. If indeed the beings encountered in abductions are not products of our minds, then where might they come from? The most obvious option is right here on Earth. There is widespread historical testimony and legend of other beings living with us, but apparent to us only intermittently, as they live in some kind of ‘other dimension’. Pretty much every civilisation has built a folklore around such creatures. Elves, trolls, fairies and many other names exist for them and it would be quite easy to add to the list the ‘greys’, one of the most widely reported alien beings said to be abducting humans today.

We assume humans are the most advanced species on Earth, when of course we should add “as far as we understand or have discovered”. Perhaps we see these beings in the same way that the more intelligent animals on Earth see humans. They clearly know we exist and interact with us, but we cannot know how they interpret us. Does your dog or cat think of you as a mystical being because you can predict it is about to start raining and you bring it inside your home? Do they even think you created the rain?

BACK FROM THE FUTURE is another option, because the entities usually reported appear to be most often humanoid and more intelligent than we are. And their coming here in a flying machine suggests they originate from the sky. If it were possible to take a plane back to 1824, and people wearing modern clothing using high tech walkie-talkies stepped out, then several of the explanations in this list might come to an observer’s mind. But the idea this craft had come from the future to the past would be less obvious. Especially if those in the machine did not want the locals to know that is who they were.

EXTRATERRESTRIAL is the default explanation for the abduction phenomenon. Partly because that is what the beings themselves often claim they are. Although the details offered are almost always improbable and besides have moved with the times. When in the 1950s it was considered possible that planets like Mars or Venus could host alien life, they were the go-to home for science fiction stories and also presumptions about UFO origins. Indeed, ufonauts themselves claimed to come from such places. But as those options disappeared, the aliens have conveniently moved ‘home’ to places we cannot travel yet – so cannot know if any beings might exist there.

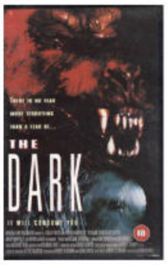
The definitive solution to the abduction mystery may be none of the things above. Meanwhile we just have to step back and admit there are things going on in the Universe that we do not as yet have the capacity to explain.

RAIDER OF THE LOST MONSTER FLICKS!

KS
That's All Folks!
HUNT EMERSON

What does a cryptozoologist do when the world goes into lockdown? One of the (very) few upsides of the Covid-19 restrictions endured in the UK was the opportunity for KARL SHUKER to watch far more monster movies than he normally would (or could) have done! Consequently, here for your delectation, excerpted exclusively for FT from his 'Shuker In MovieLand' blog, are some of Karl's thoughts on a diverse collection of creature features...

THE DARK (1993)



One long-anticipated cryptozoology-themed movie that I finally caught up with during lockdown was *The Dark* (aka *The Relic* aka *The God Rat*), originally released in Italy in 1993.

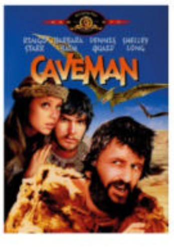
Directed by Craig Pryce, it stars Stephen McHattie as a leather-jacketed, motorbike-riding cryptozoologist (remind you of anyone?) named Gary 'Hunter' Henderson. He is seeking a mysterious subterranean beast akin to a giant carnivorous rodent that excavates huge tunnels underneath a graveyard, feeds on recently interred corpses and secretes a slimy substance that has miraculous, swift-acting healing properties. Filmed in Canada, this unusual movie also stars Neve Campbell, making her big-screen debut, as Hunter's girlfriend Jesse Donovan.

The monster is only seen in brief glimpses, and then just its toothy, long-jawed head and long-clawed forepaws for the most part. The plot is fairly pedestrian – a good cryptozoologist seeking to study and preserve the creature for its taxonomic significance as an apparent prehistoric survivor and the potential medicinal benefits of its slime versus a bad ex-cop relentlessly hunting it down in revenge for its killing of his one-time police partner (in self-defence, it should be noted).

What had always intrigued me about this hard-to-find movie was that its cryptid subject is more than a little reminiscent of a bona fide mystery beast. Reported from Scotland, this latter cryptid is known as the earth hound, and is indeed said to frequent graveyards and devour buried corpses. My book *Mysteries of Planet Earth* (1999) was the first crypto-book to investigate and document the earth hound.

Incidentally, this film should not be confused – but often is – with another cryptozoology-themed movie also entitled *The Relic*. Directed by Peter Hyams and originally released in 1997, its very different plot concerns a monstrous entity inadvertently transported back to the USA from South America, which duly runs amok in Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History.

CAVEMAN (1981)



This 1981 prehistoric comedy movie has the unlikely cast of Ringo Starr, Barbara Bach, Dennis Quaid and Shelley Long. Directed by Carl Gottlieb and released by United Artists, it tells the tale of a puny caveman outcast Atouk (Ringo's character), and how he gradually gathers together a loyal clan of similar misfits to defeat a bullying rival caveman clan, thanks to a series of inventions and evolutionary ploys that they develop throughout the movie: weapons, fire, upright stance and Atouk's ability to ride a giant reptile into battle!

Unapologetically slapstick in style, it is packed full of great visual and aural gags. The caveman language is rudimentary, so the movie has to rely heavily upon sight and sound effects. However, these help to grant it international appeal, as do some purposefully comical, sub-Harryhausen stop-motion dinosaurs, plus a man-in-a-costume yeti.

For as is virtually *de rigueur* in such movies, *Caveman* anachronistically places cavemen (and women) alongside dinosaurs and a pterosaur, plus the afore-mentioned yeti and a giant Venus flytrap-like plant with tentacles and amorous intentions toward a bewildered Atouk. My favourite monster is the giant unidentifiable quadupedal dinosaur with a horned snout and bulging frog-like eyes that initially terrorises the cave tribes and is later used by Atouk as his battle steed.

Interestingly, in overall form this memorable monster bears at least a passing resemblance to certain of the huge and historically significant, if nowadays palæontologically-outdated, dinosaur reconstructions created more than a century ago by painter and sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins and still on display in London's Crystal Palace park. Perhaps they served as inspiration for some of the prehistoric creatures in this movie?

DINOSAURUS! (1960)

ALIVE WITH THRILLS THAT STARTED A MILLION YEARS AGO!
DINOSAURUS!
CinemaScope COLOR by DeLuxe

Dinosaurus! is a B-movie from 1960, directed by Irvin Yeaworth and released by Universal. Set on a Caribbean island (actually filmed on location on St Croix in the US Virgin Islands), it sees two frozen, ostensibly long-dead dinosaurs dredged up from the depths during the building of a new harbour and placed on a beach to thaw out before being shipped to a scientific institution. One is a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the other a *Brontosaurus*. Moreover, unknown to most of the island residents, a third frozen body is washed up separately, that of a Neanderthal Man, who is sought by the movie's villain, the island's governor, to sell to the highest bidder.

The Neanderthal thaws out quickly – not dead, merely in suspended animation – and flees unseen into the forest. That same night, there's a major thunderstorm, and a bolt of lightning that strikes both defunct dinosaurs restores them to life in the best Frankenstein manner. The herbivorous dinosaur strolls placidly off into the forest, but unsurprisingly the *T. rex* goes on the rampage, uniting the islanders in a desperate bid to annihilate it before it does the same to them. The main story takes forever to get going, but happily the pace eventually picks up.

ABOVE: An anachronistic frog-eyed dinosaur in the 1981 prehistoric comedy *Caveman*.

THE MONSTERS BEAR A RESEMBLANCE TO THE DINOSAURS ON DISPLAY IN LONDON'S CRYSTAL PALACE

The dinosaurs are a serviceable mixture of stop-motion models for mid-range/distance shots and puppets for close-ups. No major stars feature in *Dinosaurus!* – apparently the hero, Bart (Ward Ramsey), was originally going to be played by none other than Steve McQueen, but he opted out in favour of a role in *The Magnificent Seven* – a wise decision!

In the film, Bart states that dinosaurs were about a million years old. Why was it that dinosaur movie makers for much of the 20th century seemed unable to grasp that the Age of Dinosaurs was many millions of years ago (the Mesozoic Era, to be precise), as opposed to the Pleistocene Epoch? A browse through any children's book on dinosaurs would have told them that. Perhaps they felt that suggesting that these formidable reptiles were still alive relatively recently (geologically speaking) made the popular movie theme of them coming back to life easier to believe? Who knows?

MEET THE APPLEGATES (1990)

MEET THE APPLEGATES

Gigantic insects are a staple ingredient of classic monster movies – most commonly gargantuan ants, but sometimes including giant bees or wasps, immense moths, mega-mosquitoes, colossal crickets and grasshoppers, even some truly enormous cockroaches; but I can confidently say that the oversized insects in this movie are decidedly different from anything else on the big – or small – screen.

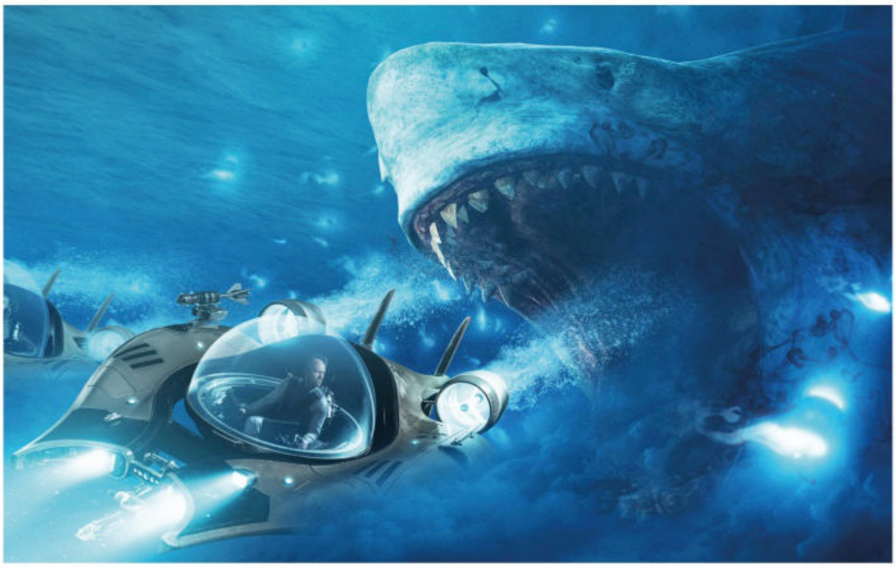
Directed by Michael Lehmann and released in 1990 by Triton Pictures, *Meet The Applegates* is a curious confection of black comedy and environmental satire. Its surreal storyline concerns an undiscovered species of giant Brazilian mantis-like insect with the ability to shape-shift into human form, which a family of them do in an attempt to infiltrate a typical US town as a family of typical US citizens – the titular Applegates – while covertly intending to blow up its nuclear plant in revenge for their South American rainforest home being destroyed.

Unfortunately for them, they soon become subverted by such human failings as illicit sex, drug-taking, credit-card overspending, and so on, and their nefarious schemes go hilariously awry. The heads of the family are played by Ed Begley Jr and Stockard Channing; iterestingly, Begley is an environmental activist in real life.

Despite (or because of) the ludicrous plot, *Meet the Applegates* is an engaging fantasy-comedy, and at just 90 minutes long it avoids stretching its bizarre theme to breaking point.

WOLFEN (1981)

Wolfen, directed by Michael Wadleigh and filmed on location in the South Bronx area of New York City, is the 1981 movie version of *The Wolfen*, bestselling *Communion* author Whitley Strieber's fascinating 1978 novel about a cryptic – and cryptid – species of super-intelligent canid that through convergent evolution has attained a humanoid level of sentience and even certain morphological attributes, such as dexterous hand-like paws. Yet it has remained largely unknown to *Homo sapiens*, except for supposed legends of werewolves that in reality are based upon fleeting, and generally fatal, encounters with wolfen,



LEFT: Jason Statham pursued by a giant prehistoric shark in The Meg. **BELOW:** Adam Faith and Terence Longden in the gentler 1961 film *What a Whopper!*

for whom lost, abandoned and sick humans are natural prey. Fate steps in when a series of grisly human killings in modern-day NYC leads the police to the sensational discovery of this hitherto hidden species of dogman.

The Wolfen is definitely one of my all-time favourite cryptozoology-themed novels, but the movie was, for me, a distinct disappointment. Albert Finney plays an increasingly tiresome NYPD cop named Captain Dewey Wilson, clearly meant to be the dysfunctional anti-social genius character that crops up regularly in sci-fi movies. Sometimes these work well, other times they are simply irritating – Wilson is definitely drawn from the latter category.

Also, whereas in the novel the wolfen were categorically cryptozoological – as I noted earlier, even their paws were humanoid – in the movie they are portrayed as morphologically normal if super-intelligent wolves, which for me was a major let-down. A modern CGI-driven remake could well succeed where this four-decades-old film failed in doing justice to the highly original, thought-provoking subject of Strieber's novel. Don't get me wrong, *Wolfen* is by no means a bad movie: it's just not the one I was hoping for.

THE MEG (2018)

THE MEG
"TOTALLY JAWSOME"

Directed by Jon Turteltaub and based on the bestselling novel *Meg* by my Facebook friend Steve Alten, this Warner Bros film's nominal lead is Jason Statham, but its real stars are a couple of CGI megalodons, representing the giant prehistoric shark *Otodus megalodon* – the largest shark species ever recorded by science.

Officially, it became extinct approximately 2.6 million years ago during the late Pliocene epoch, and is principally known physically only from fossilised teeth and vertebræ; but thanks to some intriguing eyewitness accounts of supposedly gargantuan sharks, some mystery beast investigators have speculated that it might still exist today.

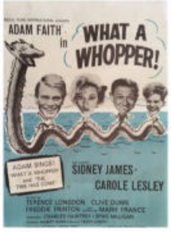
SOME INVESTIGATORS HAVE SPECULATED THAT *OTODUS MEGALODON* MIGHT STILL EXIST TODAY!

When the megalodon was first made known to science and formally named back in the 1840s, based on the huge dimensions of its triangular and highly-serrated teeth (up to 7.5 in/19cm high: 'megalodon' translates as 'big tooth') an estimated total length for the entire shark of around 75-98ft (23-30m) was postulated. Later research has seen this estimate downsized to a 'mere' 43-55ft (13-17m); although to put that into perspective, this is still more than twice the length of the great white shark *Carcharodon carcharias*, the largest species of carnivorous shark known to exist today. But now, even newer research has upsized the megalodon again, to as much as 65ft (20m). However, *The Meg* is a monster movie, not a shark documentary, so the film makers have adhered to the earlier flawed, but cinematically more spectacular, 75-ft version: think *Jaws* writ large – very large!! The result is a truly mega megalodon, a prodigious prehistoric behemoth which, if it had lived in an earlier geological era, would have been a veritable Jurassic Shark!

I'll avoid spoilers here, but the scenario of how the megs are discovered is quite fascinating, and they have been digitally recreated on screen to stunning effect. Once their discovery has been made, however, the plot adheres by and large to the generic monster movie storyline – a flawed but immensely brave hero sets out to confront said monster(s), interacts along the way with a villain and a naysayer, some wisecracking sidekicks, a cute extra-smart kid, and an initially aloof but ultimately adoring, sassy lady, and after a series of thrilling set pieces finally battles said monsters(s) in a climactic confrontation of epic proportions. But you probably already guessed all that without even needing to watch the film – no one goes to a monster movie to be blown away by intellectual depth, philosophical nuance or even scientific authenticity. You go to see the monsters, and *The Meg* definitely delivers on that score.

I wouldn't recommend *The Meg* to anyone with a fear of sharks, but hardened monster fans will lap it up – it certainly engaged my attention and interest throughout. I expect some movie (and perhaps palæontological) purists will disagree, but I love *The Meg*, and rate it as a worthy addition to the cinematic sub-genre of giant beasts on the rampage.

WHAT A WHOPPER! (1961)



I can still fondly remember the first time that I ever saw this early 1960s British comedy. I was about 13 years old and had been fascinated by the Loch Ness monster ever since I first read about it as a child in a wonderful book called *Stranger Than People*. The movie was shown on TV one evening in England, and I watched it in absolute delight on our faithful old black and white television (as the movie itself was made in b/w, so I didn't miss anything), thoroughly engrossed and willing Nessie to appear asap. A few years later, it was reshown, and again I watched it avidly, despite knowing the plot this time. But after that – nothing. Happily, however, during the early 2000s, *What a Whopper!* finally made a much-belated but very welcome return to the small screen in the UK and was finally released on DVD in 2011, when it was added to my sizeable collection of cryptozoology-themed films.

Speaking of which: it may come as a surprise to learn that in spite of the longstanding, global interest in Nessie, particularly since the first major flourish of modern-day sightings in 1933, only a single Loch Ness Monster-themed movie had been produced prior to the release of *What a Whopper! – Secret of the Loch*, directed by Milton Rosmer and released in 1934. Moreover, even *What a Whopper!* is less concerned with Nessie directly than with with the theme of using her celebrity status to make some money by decidedly nefarious but hilarious means.

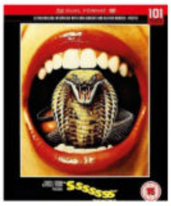
Although its leading star is none other than 1960s British heart-throb singer Adam Faith, for the most part the cast list of *What a Whopper!* reads like a who's who of classic British comedy stars. These include Sid James, Spike Milligan, Wilfrid Brambell, Amanda Barrie, Charles Hawtrey, Clive Dunn, Lance Percival, Terry Scott, Molly Weir, Frank Forsyth and Freddie Frinton, plus an appearance by famous Scottish journalist and broadcaster Fyfe Robertson playing himself.

Directed by Gilbert Gunn and reworked by screenwriter Terry Nation (who also created the Daleks for *Doctor Who*) from an original story by Jeremy Lloyd and Trevor Peacock, the film stars Faith as perennially-unsuccessful would-be writer Tony Blake. After receiving yet another rejection from a publisher for his latest book about the Loch Ness monster, and in dire need of some cash to avoid being evicted from his rented one-room flat in Chelsea, Tony hits upon the idea of faking a photo of the LNM and selling it to the media for a tidy sum of money.

Travelling to Loch Ness with his friend Vernon, Vernon's girlfriend Charlotte and pretty French hitch-hiker Marie whom they pick up along the way, Tony uses a hidden speaker to create a monstrous roaring sound that he convinces the locals living near the loch is none other than the cry of Nessie herself. He also attempts to create his planned phony photo using a fake monster – only to discover that several locals have come up with exactly the same idea, using their own equally faux LNM lookalikes. And when one of the locals finds his hidden speaker, Tony realises that the game is well and truly up.Fleeing from a posse of enraged locals, Tony and Marie jump into a rowing boat and head out across the loch. They hear a loud roar and – yes, you've guessed it – there is Nessie herself, all scaly vertical neck and grinning face, who turns to the camera and gives an extremely louche wink before rumbling: "What a whopper!" Wonderful!

ABOVE: Not a film for ophiophobes–1973's *Sssssss* features real snakes aplenty.

SSSSSSS (1973)



I've seen a fair few monsters movies over the years, that's for sure. There are strange monster movies, there are very strange monster movies, there are extremely strange monster movies – and there's *Sssssss*, which I finally caught up with after reading and hearing about it for almost 50 years.

Directed by Bernard L Kowalski and produced by Daniel C Striepeke, *Sssssss* was originally released in 1973 (under the title *Sssnake* in the UK), which meant that I was far too young to see it at the cinema, but its fantastical storyline was so sensational back then that it commandeered plenty of column inches in the film review pages of newspapers and magazines, which I read with a delicious mixture of fascination and horror. I don't recall it ever being shown on Britain's mainstream TV channels, but with the eventual advent of ex-rental and sell-thru videos, followed by DVDs, I spasmodically sought out *Sssssss*, yet always to no avail – until mid-July 2020, when I was able to buy a copy on eBay.

Before I go any further, let me say in all seriousness that if you are an ophiophobe, you definitely do *not* want to watch *Sssssss* – truly! (Indeed, you may not even want to continue reading this review.)

Its story begins with 'eccentric' (i.e. completely mad!) herpetologist Dr Carl Stoner (Strother Martin) selling a mysterious creature concealed inside a large wooden crate to a local carnival owner in the dead of night. The unseen creature whimpers piteously, and Stoner refers to it as one of his failures... The scene shifts to a local college where Stoner is seeking a grant to finance some research involving snakes and venom as well as a male student to assist him, because his previous student assistant apparently left to attend to a sick relative and never came back.

Up steps David (a youthful Dirk Benedict, the only famous name in this movie), who discovers that dealing with some very dangerous, venomous serpents (including black mambas and a huge, imperious king cobra that Stoner treats with unmitigated reverence) has its compensations. This is because by working at Stoner's home-cum-laboratory where the snakes are kept, he also gets to spend time with, and becomes very close to, Stoner's beautiful daughter Kristina (Heather Menzies), who shares her father's passion for these reptiles.

So far, so (relatively) normal, but then it all goes very weird – or at least an unsuspecting David does, thanks to the series of mysterious injections that Stoner insists on giving him, claiming that they are necessary to render him immune to cobra venom. At first, they simply make David very tired and prone to strange hallucinations while asleep, but as the days pass he notices subtle changes to his face, and his skin begins to exhibit an alarming tendency to peel off, leaving a new, fully-formed layer underneath. His body temperature also feels much cooler than normal. Stoner, however, assures him that these are merely harmless, temporary side-effects of the injections.

One evening, David and Kristina visit the carnival, where David goes inside a special exhibition tent to view a freak dubbed the Snake Man. David expects to see an obvious fake, but instead he is startled to find an extraordinary partially-limbless entity covered in pallid scales but with a somewhat humanoid head and face and bright blue eyes. Back at the house, Stoner is surreptitiously tape-recording his own descriptions of the effects that the injections are having on David, ending by stating that the changes will soon accelerate and become cataclysmic – which indeed they do. This induces Stoner to take drastic steps to ensure that news of his work does not leak out, either to the outside world or to the unsuspecting Kristina, who has no notion of her father's crazy scheme and what he is doing to David. The movie's scriptwriters cleverly bestowed the Kristina character with very poor vision when not wearing her glasses, in order to make more credible her ignorance of the deadly proceedings unfolding before her.

I don't want to reveal too much about how this surreal plot plays out in its climactic and highly dramatic denouement, featuring what is quite possibly the most unexpected final scene I've ever encountered in a movie; but here are two major hints – read no further if you don't want to know what they are.

Finally beginning to suspect that her father may not be telling her everything concerning his researches, on a hunch Kristina visits the carnival one evening after closing time and sneaks into the tent containing the Snake Man, which she views in absolute horror before fleeing in blind panic. If I say that Stoner's previous, gone-missing assistant had bright blue eyes, I'm sure you can work out the rest…

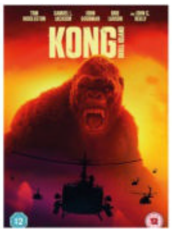
Ditto, if I say that Stoner fervently believes that if humanity is to survive, it must transform, and that the king cobra is his preferred model for future success. So if I were David, I wouldn't be buying any new jeans, shoes, long-sleeved shirts or gloves any time soon…

Ssssss boasts a totally preposterous plot, but is so extravagantly 'out there' that it actually makes for compelling viewing. And as this movie reveals in an announcement at its beginning, the king cobras and pythons used in it are indeed real and very much alive, not fakes or the products of photographic trickery: so some highly-skilled snake handling can be viewed throughout. Taxonomic verisimilitude concerning the film's obligatory mongoose – there is usually at least one such creature in any snake-themed movie – is another matter entirely.

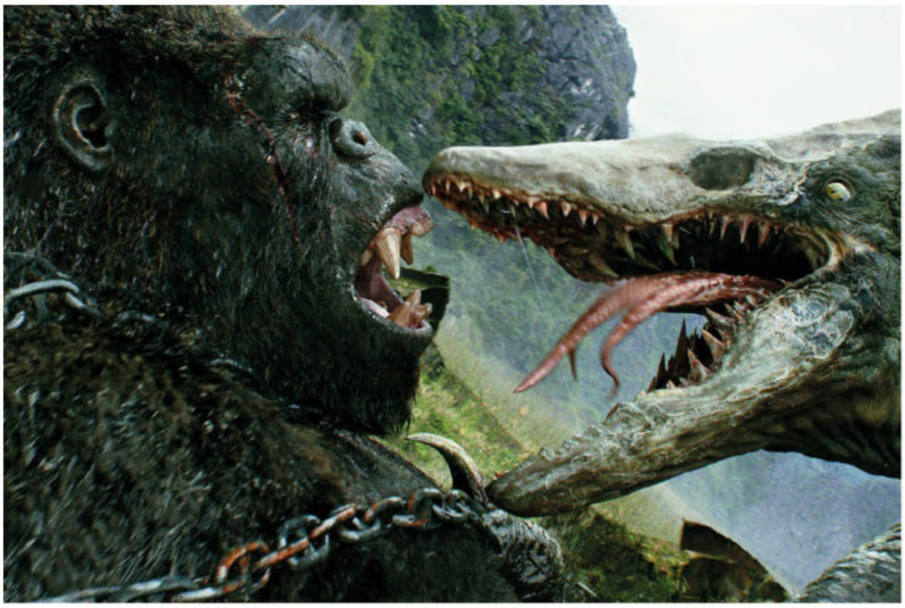
This is because Rikki-Tikki-Tavi's supposed representative in this movie actually appears to be a large black-furred, grey-headed species of South American mustelid known as a tayra – why didn't they simply use a genuine mongoose, as seen in various other movies? As I say, however, the king cobras are real, and one scene in which Stoner goes inside a large enclosure into which a king cobra is released for him to catch and milk its venom while the public watch from a safe distance is breathtaking, as we watch this biggest of all venomous snakes (up to 19ft/6m long) rear up until its huge head sways at the level of Stoner's chest.

As I stated earlier, *Ssssss* is not a movie for anyone with a fear of snakes, but it is definitely a memorable curio for monster movie aficionados.

KONG: SKULL ISLAND (2017)



I first saw this long-anticipated monster movie at my local cinema and revisited it on DVD during lockdown. Directed by Jordan Vogt-Roberts and set in 1973, its storyline focuses upon a secret team of scientists and military muscle sent by a covert US Government organisation named Monarch to the recently-discovered, mist-enshrouded, totally-unexplored Skull Island. Their mission is to seek out and find huge hidden monsters – a task that turns out to be all too easy, much to their increasing alarm and peril! Sandwiched between two Godzilla movies, *Kong: Skull Island* was the second entry in the ongoing MonsterVerse film series created by Legendary Pictures.



BELOW: Giant ape versus reptilian skull-crawler in *Kong: Skull Island*.

While I feel that Tom Hiddleston (playing James Conrad, a former British SAS captain leading the expeditionary party to Skull Island) has been unfairly panned by the critics, the film's monsters are zoologically implausible to say the least (yet thoroughly entertaining nonetheless). But in any film featuring a gorilla the height of the Empire State Building, this fact was hardly a surprise.

Starring alongside Hiddleston are Samuel L Jackson as US Army soldier and helicopter squadron leader Lt Col. Preston Packard, John Goodman as senior Monarch official Bill Randa and Brie Larson as investigative photo-journalist Mason Weaver – the Fay Wray equivalent in this latest *King Kong* outing.

Other than Kong himself, naturally – represented here as a truly gargantuan animate tower of coruscating CGI fury when threatened, but traditionally gentle toward the gentle sex – my own particular favourite monster is what initially appears to be a fair-sized algæ-covered hillock, mysteriously rising above the surface of a huge lake. However, this odd-looking object soon reveals itself to be the humped back of a truly humongous amphibious yak-like ungulate – a bovine behemoth which proceeds to stare impassively at Hiddleston's armed-and-ready Captain Conrad with cud-chewing indifference. I've been (semi-) reliably informed that it is officially known as a 'sker buffalo'.

As is expected in all the best monster movies, there are the obligatory giant invertebrates, including a squid-octopus combo, a forest canopy-concealed spider with enormous bamboo-mimicking vertical legs, and a grotesque parasitised stick insect. These lurk unseen for much of their screen time, but with murderous intent aplenty. There are also some very weird giant flying beasts called leafwings. However, *Skull Island*'s principal monstrous villains are grotesque, two-limbed reptilian beasts known as skullcrawlers. They live underground, but surface periodically to wreak havoc upon their human victims, with skullcrawler *numero uno* being a colossal monster of comparable size to Kong himself. Morphologically, they are truly bizarre, looking something like what might be the macabre outcome if a gigantic tatzelworm or lindorm and an immense wingless pterodactyl ever got it together – but without these latter beasts' charm!

The critics scoffed, are scoffing, and no doubt will continue to scoff, but I don't go to monster movies for zoological reality, I go for special effects and escapism, and this film more than delivers on both counts. As for the plot: look, guys, this is a monster movie – you weren't really expecting a plot, surely?

LEFT: B-Movie birds! Saved from extinction, the ungrateful *Terror Birds* kill every human in sight.

TERROR BIRDS (2015)

TERROR BIRDS
THEY'RE NOT EXTINCT

Directed by Sean Cain and first released in 2015, *Terror Birds* follows reclusive zillionaire Harvey Sullivan (an unrecognisable Greg 'BJ and the Bear' Evigan) as he follows up native reports of greatly-feared 'death birds' said to live on a couple of tiny uninhabited Caribbean islands. He discovers, to his amazement, a single surviving pair of *Titanis*-like terror birds (aka phorusrhacids), but of enormous size (more *Kelenken* than *Titanis*), officially believed to have become extinct at least 2.5 million years ago. So of course he captures them and secretly transports them to his isolated estate in Texas, where he keeps them contained in a sizeable paddock ringed by a high electrified fence as he attempts to incubate and rear new generations of terror birds to save their species from extinction (and, rather less altruistically, sell them to the higher bidder).

However, after intruding birdwatcher/scientist Keith Stern (Craig Nigh) is devoured by the big birds, his daughter Maddy (Jessica Lee Keller) decides to investigate his disappearance, and together with her friends traces his last-known movements, which leads them to Sullivan's estate… and the terror birds. As in all such movies, their plan goes horrifically awry, yielding the usual ever-increasing body count of bloodied, dismembered corpses as the birds systematically stalk and attempt to slaughter every human that they encounter.

Irrespective of how hackneyed the plot of *Terror Birds* may sound, I still enjoyed it: the titular monsters' stunning visual presentation makes it a superior addition to the plethora of monster-themed B-movies released in recent years, and one particular aspect of their depiction jumped out at me: instead of wings, these terror birds sport a pair of clawed forearms.

While this makes them look very odd, in reality it does have official palæontological precedence. For at the time when this movie was first conceived, there actually was a theory abroad that these birds did indeed possess such appendages, in turn inspired by some incomplete and ambiguous fossil forearm remains on file for these species.

IN THIS FILM THE FASCINATING IMAGE OF TERROR BIRDS WITH ARMS IS FOREVER PRESERVED

Later on, conversely, various more comprehensive discoveries effectively scotched this 'armed' terror bird reconstruction, with current palæntological depictions giving them wings instead. But in this film the fascinating image of terror birds with arms is forever preserved, and for that, if for no other reason, we should celebrate this movie's existence.

Incidentally, this is by no means the first movie to feature terror birds – a superb stop-motion animated terror bird created by Ray Harryhausen appeared as long ago as 1961 in *Mysterious Island*, based very loosely on a Jules Verne novel of the same title. Tragically, however, its zoological significance was largely lost upon cinema-going audiences, because most of them thought that it was simply a giant chicken!

HYDRA: THE LOST ISLAND (2009)

HYDRA
THE LOST ISLAND

In 2009, CineTel Films released a made-for-cable-television movie entitled *Hydra: The Lost Island*, directed by Andrew Prendergast, which was subsequently made available internationally on DVD.

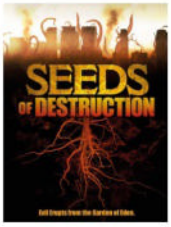
A slick blend of thriller, horror, action and mythology, *Hydra* tells how the legendary many-headed Lernean hydra is reawakened from countless centuries of dormancy by a major seaquake near its previously uncharted volcanic Mediterranean island domain. (The minor detail that it had already been slain long ago by Hercules, aka Heracles, in the classical Greek myth of his 12 great labours seems to have been conveniently overlooked here.)

No doubt hungry after its prolonged fasting, the bloodthirsty mega-beast proceeds to chomp up everyone who sets foot on its island. These include a party of vicious bounty-hunters, some of their ex-convict targets (one of whom is played by Hollywood actor George Stults), and even one of the film's two leading protagonists, female archæologist Dr Valerie Cammon (Polly Shannon) who is seeking the fabled sword of Hercules.

If wielded against the hydra, this mighty blade can not only successfully lop off the monster's heads and stop them regrowing, but also kill the beast, the only weapon with the power to do so. Despite *Hydra* being a low-budget movie, its special effects, breathing life into the polycephalic predator, are every bit as impressive as its rapacity for human prey is unrelenting.

For multi-headed monster movie buffs everywhere, *Hydra: The Lost Island* is well worth a watch.

SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION (2011)



Whereas most monster movies feature revived dinosaurs and other prehistoric fauna on the rampage, this one – a Syfy Channel offering from 2011 found on DVD at a pre-lockdown car boot sale – concerns a truly monstrous plant.

Apart from *The Day of the Triffids*, the two (versions of *Little Shop of Horrors*, and a horror movie entitled *Mandrake*, ferocious flora don't feature extensively in my film collection, so I knew that this was one I'd enjoy.

Directed by Paul Ziller, *Seeds of Destruction* concerns a prehistoric plant seed salvaged from an ancient archæological site believed to be the original biblical Garden of Eden. The seed, and others collected with it, has remained dormant for thousands of years – until stolen by baddies for financial gain and inadvertently allowed to germinate, whereupon it rapidly engenders an immense and seemingly indestructible subterranean root system that threatens to devastate not just the entire North American continent but the whole planet, triggering apocalyptic earthquakes and, should the roots reach the oceans, gargantuan tsunamis on a scale never before experienced. Not for nothing is this movie subtitled *The Terror Beneath*.

Nor is that the full extent of this botanical behemoth's cataclysmic capabilities. It also sends forth Jack & the Beanstalk-sized shoots, thousands of feet high, when attempts are made by the American military to annihilate its rampaging roots.

LEFT: Giant crabs and Dana Gillespie's cleavage on display in Hammer's 1968 *The Lost Continent*.

However, the true horror eventually revealed is that crazed rogue scientist Frame Marcos wants to return the Earth to what he deems to be its original idyllic state, that of the Garden of Eden, whence this antediluvian seed and the others originated, but this means wiping out humanity and everything created by it. Furthermore, this phytological Fury offers the means to achieve such a goal, because it is so pure genetically that it served as the guardian of Eden, protecting it from all impure life forms by destroying them – and it has germinated now in the modern world because it has sensed that, by its standards, all life today is indeed impure.

Maverick US government agent Jack Taylor (Adrian Pasdar) duly joins forces with Marcos's former colleague, botanist Jocelyn Snow and young environmental activists Joe and Kate in a frantic effort to halt the primeval plant's seemingly unstoppable progress and thereby prevent a global ecological and human disaster. Other than Pasdar, there are no stars, but as with all monster movies it's not the actors that our attention is focused on anyway. The CGI effects, while not stupendous, are decent, and I found this quite a suspenseful and gripping movie with a very original storyline.

THE LOST CONTINENT (1968)

THE LOST CONTINENT

Directed, produced, and written by Michael Carreras and released in 1968, *The Lost Continent* is a decidedly weird science fiction/fantasy movie produced by Britain's famous Hammer Films, one of several movies in the 'Lost World'/prehistoric monsters subgenre produced by the studio. It is based on the Dennis Wheatley novel *Uncharted Seas* (1938), which, memorably, one of the characters in this movie is briefly seen reading; it wasn't so memorable for Wheatley himself, who apparently claimed he'd completely forgotten ever writing the book!

TREMORS SUCCEEDS IN BEING WICKEDLY TONGUE-IN-CHEEK, NEVER TAKING ITSELF TOO SERIOUSLY

The principal star of *The Lost Continent* is Eric Porter as Captain Lansen, supported by a number of readily recognisable British character actors such as Michael Ripper (a Hammer Films stalwart), Victor Maddern and Nigel Stock, as well as Dana Gillespie, equally well known as a singer/songwriter. The storyline is bizarre from the offset – although the offset itself is lightened by the movie's theme song, a typically jaunty 1960s ballad sung by a British jazz/soul trio named The Peddlers.

Suffice it to say that *The Lost Continent* features a ship lost at sea, captained by the tyrannical Lansen, whose passengers (most of whom have shady pasts) and crew (many of whom have ulterior motives) are imperilled by encountering an unending floating mass of carnivorous seaweed (yes, you read that correctly!), a giant green-eyed octopus and a no less gargantuan hermit crab and scorpion. Nor should we forget their confrontation with a second ship harbouring an equally marooned but exceedingly belligerent and fanatical, centuries-old community of Spanish Conquistador descendants ruled nominally by a boy king, but in practice by his evil Grand Inquisitor.

Add a doomed mutiny, an illegal cargo of unstable explosives that threatens to blow up everything and everyone on board if it should come into contact with a single drop of water – on a leaky flooding ship, at sea, in a hurricane! – and you can be sure that there's never a dull moment in this film! Don't expect Ray Harryhausen-quality standards for the monsters, but they are nonetheless entertaining in their quaintly substandard way.

TREMORS (1990)

KEVIN BACON
TREMORS

The discovery that a seventh movie in the *Tremors* franchise had been released in 2020 prompted yet another re-watch of my all-time favourite monster movie – and I enjoyed it every bit as much as I always do.

Directed by Ron Underwood and released in 1990, *Tremors* stars Kevin Bacon as Valentine ('Val') McKee and Fred Ward as Earl Bassett, a couple of buddies scratching out a living as odd-job men in a small, isolated desert community in Nevada with what turns out – given the destruction and terror soon to be unleashed – to be the exceedingly ironic name of Perfection.

A deserved success at the box-office and a cult hit in the home video market, *Tremors* has also proven very popular among cryptozoological enthusiasts, and for good reason. Its story begins with several bizarre deaths in and around Perfection, leading our two heroes to speculate initially that a serial killer must be on the loose. However, with the assistance of student seismologist Rhonda LeBeck (Finn Carter), whose field equipment is picking up some very sizeable but mystifying underground vibrations, they soon worm out the truth, literally – encountering an archaic, hitherto-undiscovered species of gargantuan subterranean worm with a taste for human flesh!

Extremely sensitive to ground-borne vibrations, this extraordinary creature is equipped with a truly monstrous maw containing several very long, powerful, and highly protrusible oral tentacles that resemble thick muscular snakes and terminate in hideous mini-jaws of their own, which firmly grab hold of the worm's intended prey and haul it inside its jaws. Duly dubbed graboids by one of their hapless victims, three of these sand-dwelling vermiform horrors eventually isolate Perfection's last few survivors on the roofs of some buildings after they have destroyed everything else in relentless pursuit of their would-be human prey, until two of them are finally annihilated.

Graboid #1 meets its doom by being shot with an elephant gun aimed directly inside its enormous jaws and throat by Perfection resident Burt Gummer (Michael Gross), who together with his wife Heather (C&W singing star Reba McEntire) have an extremely impressive array of firearms and other weapons in their basement. The second graboid swallows one of the Gummers' bombs, hurled into its gaping maw by Earl, and duly explodes.

Graboid #3, however, is too cunning to swallow another hurled bomb, spitting it back out before it has time to explode. What to do now? Happily, Val has an idea. At great personal risk, he uses himself as graboid bait, dramatically and very dangerously enticing

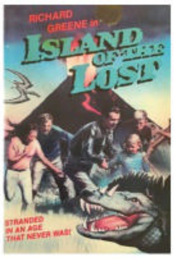
NATURE TRAIL
TREE HOUSE
ROPES
ARCHERY
DINING HALL

ABOVE: The 2020 film *Love and Monsters* was another casualty of the Covid lockdowns.

this final marauding mega-worm to emerge out at speed through a high cliff face, so that it plummets to its much-welcomed death on the rocks hundreds of feet below.

Although there are some seriously scary, heart-stopping moments, and its special effects are ultra-realistic, especially for the early 1990s, *Tremors* also succeeds in being wickedly tongue-in-cheek throughout, never taking itself too seriously.

ISLAND OF THE LOST (1967)



In 2020 fellow cryptozoology researcher Mike Playfair brought to my attention a 30-minute featurette from 1967, entitled *Island of the Lost*, in which a family led by eccentric anthropologist Josh MacRae (veteran *Robin Hood* actor Richard Greene) become stranded on a mysterious, uncharted South Pacific island inhabited by various undiscovered but belligerent beasts and visited by a warlike tribe from a neighbouring isle. Not surprisingly, they spend the remainder of the movie trying to get back to civilisation, but not only do they have the aforementioned foes to face, but also a temperamental volcano and some unsettling ground tremors to contend with. Greene's principal co-star, playing MacRae's son Stu, is Luke Halpin, still remembered today from his time as a child actor in the hugely popular dolphin-based 1960s TV show *Flipper*.

As soon as I reached the scene in this featurette that includes a flock of carnivorous ostriches with horn-like head protuberances and saw-like ridges on their backs (reminiscent of their prehistoric mammal ancestor *Dimetrodon*), I knew that I'd seen it before. However, I remembered it being part of a feature-length movie that I'd viewed many years ago on TV. Sure enough, when I investigated further, it had indeed originated as a 92-min feature – an American adventure-style monster movie directed by John Florea, produced and co-written by Ivan Tors (who had also produced the aforementioned *Flipper*), and released in 1967. Consequently, I have no idea why the truncated featurette was subsequently released. The full movie was entitled *Island of the Lost* when released in the UK, but has since acquired various other monikers, and can be obtained on DVD.

Island of the Lost was shot in the Bahamas and parts of Florida, so the tropical flora and lush scenery are real enough – the decidedly unnatural fauna are another matter entirely! The production values are abysmal – indeed, it's so bad that it's good! For in addition to its ridge-backed ratites noted earlier here, where else could you find a pack of so-called sabre-toothed wolves that are actually Alsatians and huskies sporting a set of false fangs? I kid you not!

In short, don't expect Harryhausen-level creatures in *Island of the Lost*, but in a sense that only adds to this movie's charm. Also, it's refreshing to see a cryptozoology-themed flick that is *not* of the prehistoric survivor/lost world genre, but instead features a locality containing entirely novel, wholly unknown, undiscovered modern-day cryptids. True, in one scene anthropologist MacRae proclaims: "There are things on this island we all thought were completely extinct." Perhaps he should be told that a creature can't be extinct if it has never existed to begin with! Nevertheless, this is a fun film, offering a nostalgic return to those family-friendly adventure movies of half a century ago that thrilled rather than chilled their youthful audiences, and for me was an absolute pleasure to chance upon again.

LOVE AND MONSTERS (2020)

DYLAN O'BRIEN
LOVE AND MONSTERS

On 4 November 2021, with lockdowns here in the UK finally at an end, I relaxed by watching a DVD of the 2020 post-apocalyptic monster movie *Love and Monsters*. Directed by Michael Matthews, *Love and Monsters* opens with the imminent threat of an asteroid smashing into Planet Earth. Consequently, scientists send forth rockets to divert it from its path of destruction; however, the resulting chemical fall-out mutates cold-blooded creatures into enormous monsters that destroy most of humanity, with the few survivors forced to hang on in underground colonies.

Following that bleak introduction, the movie traces the bold bid by teenager Joel (Dylan O'Brien) to trek 85 miles (137km) across the planet's surface to reach the colony housing his pre-apocalypse girlfriend Aimee (Jessica Henwick). En route, he battles all manner of monstrous mega-beasts, encounters a smattering of fellow human survivors, and is faithfully accompanied by an abandoned dog named Boy. The verbal interactions between Joel and Boy (okay, mostly from Joel, less from the dog) are priceless, with lots of the dry one-liners I always enjoy, and O'Brien puts in an entertaining performance throughout.

There are no A-listers in *Love and Monsters* (though I did spot Bruce Spence, who played Blondie the Aussie surfer in *Oz: A Rock 'N' Roll Road Movie*, a totally surreal 1976 movie musical that's one of my all-time favourite films), but inevitably it's the monsters that take centre-stage anyway. These include an immense, vicious centipede, a toad of titanic proportions (with a tongue to match), colossal snails, venomous, hallucination-engendering water leeches, vermiform horrors known as sand gobblers, and a gargantuan crab that unexpectedly proves to be Joel and Aimee's salvation. These mutated monsters of the CGI kind are wonderfully imagined and created. My personal favourite is the salmon-pink giga-gastropod, a kind of super snail and slug combined, replete with horns and tubercles, that seems rather more pacific than its unequivocally carnivorous congeners. Nevertheless, Joel wisely chooses to remain safely out of reach until this mighty mollusc has slithered on by.

The climax contains two major twists which I'll leave readers to discover for themselves. Let's just say that this is not just a monster movie, a road movie or an action movie – it is also a coming of age story in which Joel must go through many trials and tribulations along the way. Through the course of his arduous quest to find Aimee, he not only travels a great physical distance, but gradually transforms from the lovestruck, clumsy, teenager we see at the movie's beginning into the experienced, courageous, forward-thinking man that he becomes by its end.

It was a great shame that due to the Covid lockdowns, *Love and Monsters* received a limited cinema release, because its giant creepy-crawlies make it exactly the kind of film that deserves a proper big-screen outing.

For more, visit my Shuker In MovieLand blog (at: https://shukerinmovieland.blogspot.com/). You'll discover some exceedingly obscure but fascinating films you've never even heard of, let alone seen!

KARL SHUKER is a British zoologist, cryptozoologist and author. He lives in the Midlands and is a regular contributor to FT.

Tiffany Thayer versus the Flying Saucers

In an extract from his new book about Charles Fort's impact on modern culture, **JOSHUA BLU BUHS** examines the often uneasy relationship between Tiffany Thayer's Fortean Society and flying saucer enthusiasts in the 1940s and 1950s.

Charles Fort's books of anomalies advanced a philosophy that saw science as a small part of a larger system in which truth and falsehood continually transformed into one another. His work found a ragged following of sceptics who questioned not only science but the press, medicine, and politics. Though their worldviews varied, they shared compelling questions about genius, reality, and authority. At the centre of this community was adman, writer, and *enfant terrible* Tiffany Thayer, who founded the Fortean Society, ran it for almost three decades, and edited its magazine, *Doubt* (see **FT200:48-52**).

In my new book *Think to New Worlds*, I argue that the fortean effect on modern culture is deeper than you think. Forteanism expanded the imaginative possibilities of science fiction, Modernist literature and ufological theorising; it gave members of those communities ways to think about how the world was organised, and how power moved through those structures. In this excerpt, I examine the link between forteans and flying saucer enthusiasts in the 1940s and 1950s. Fort provided some ways to think about aerial phenomena; forteans built on what he'd written and pushed past them into new imaginative frontiers. From these theories came a plethora of ideas about the order of the Universe and the arrangements of power. This pluralism divided the Fortean Society. For the very existence of so many contradictory voices could be proof that there was a more mundane conspiracy afoot, and that the forteans themselves were the victims. It was a very different, very cynical – very Thayerian – manner of imagining the world's organisation and the powers that motivated it.

THE COSMIC AQUARIUM

Long before UFOs caught the world's attention, Charles Fort had written about strange objects in the sky and speculated about their provenance. The Fortean Society continued in this vein, with Tiffany Thayer gathering both reports of atmospheric anomalies and members inclined to wonder about them in ways unlike scientists and government officials. Fort and Forteanism expanded the imagination of those studying the anomalies, transforming unusual phenomena into new views of the Universe and humanity's place in it. By applying fortean formulæ, students of flying saucers thought they could expose structural features of the cosmos and explain the forces that organised reality. They could see how power was arranged, who was in control of the world.

LEFT: Tiffany Thayer in Hollywood during the 1930s. **FACING PAGE:** Creatures of the air jungle in a 1943 illustration for Arthur Conan Doyle's story "The Horror of the Heights".

CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK

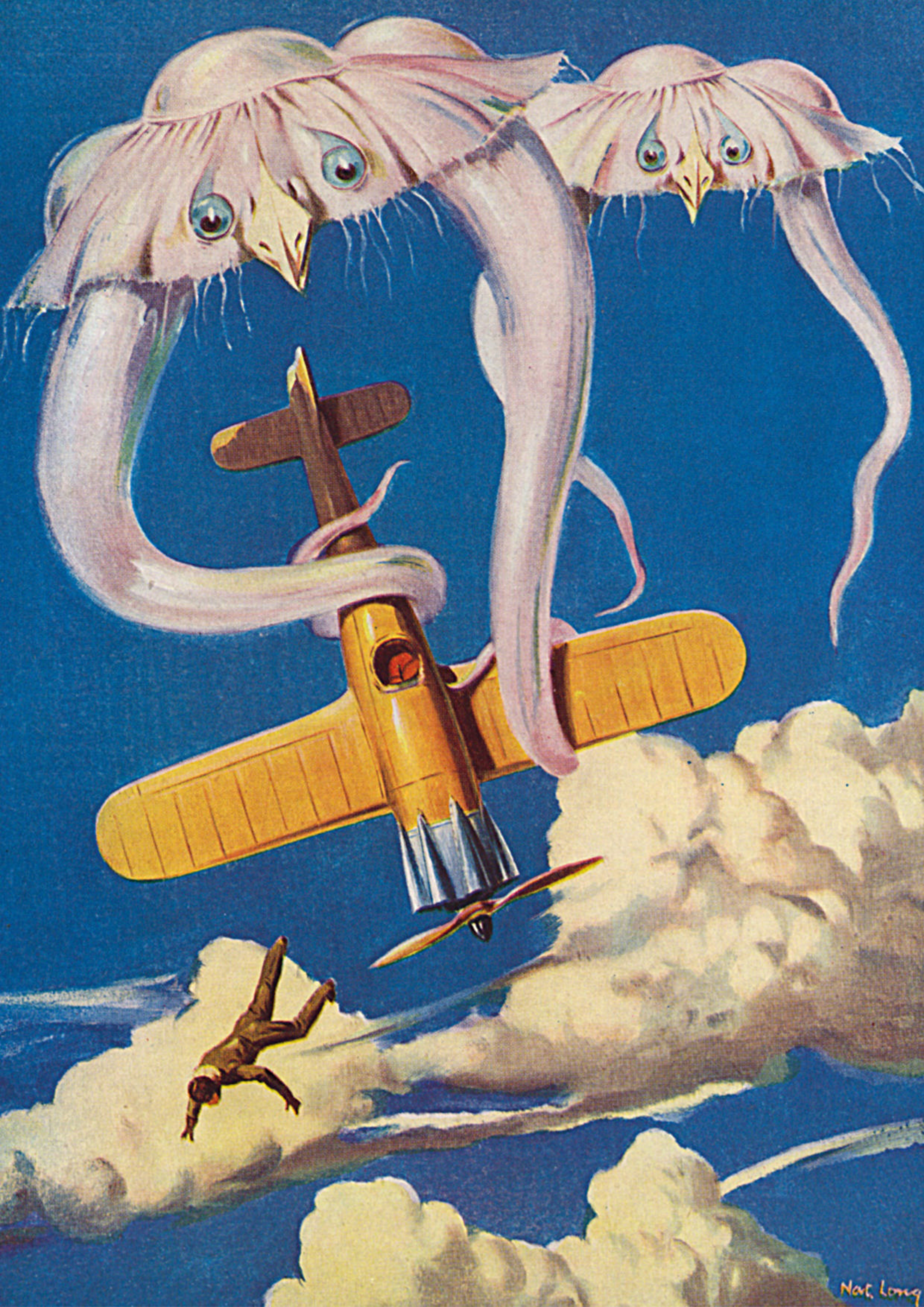
MEMBERS DECIDED THAT UFOs WERE A PROPER SUBJECT FOR THE SOCIETY

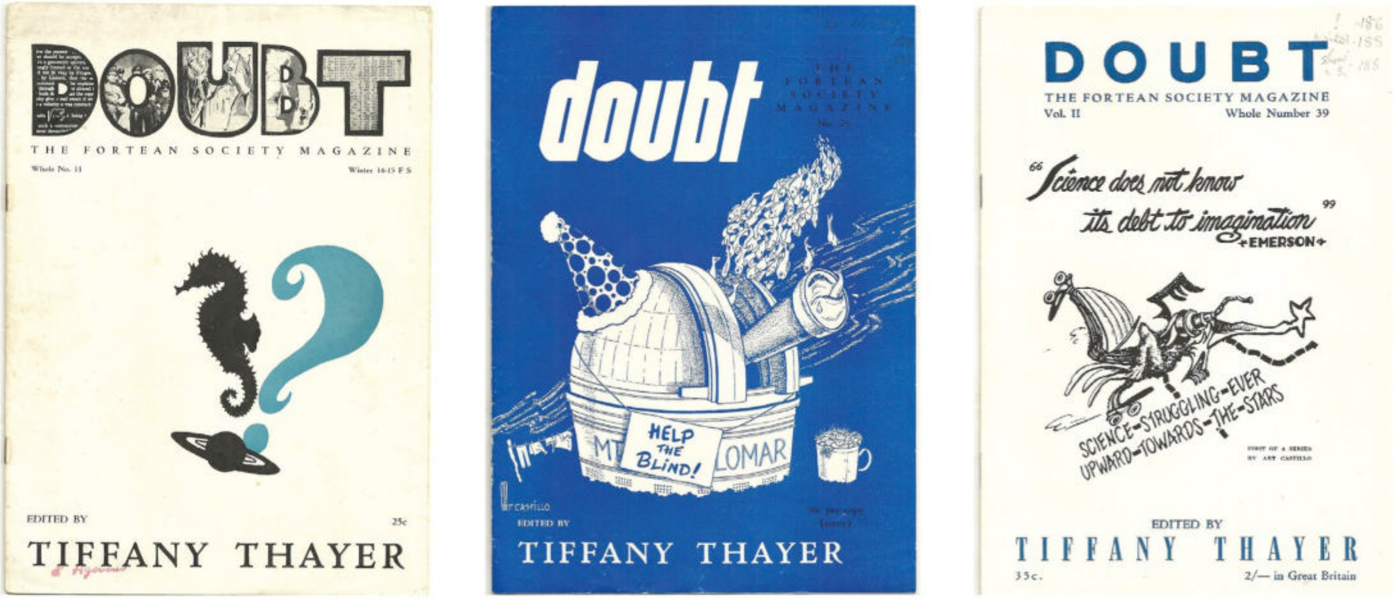
The fit between the flying saucer subculture and Forteanism, though, was not perfect. Ufologists did not restrict their imaginations, descriptions and explanations to strict Forteanism, but mixed it with fundamentalism, New Agery and conspiracism. Flying saucers were variously understood to be scientific objects, negations of science and the fulfilment of modernity: the final reconciliation of religion and science, for good or ill. These speculations, and the phenomena that prompted them, fractured the fortean community. Many members decided that flying saucers were a proper subject for the society, even subsuming all Forteanism to the study of UFOs. But Thayer despised both the topic and the subculture. And so the members and their secretary jockeyed for control, of the Society and of Forteanism.

NEW LANDS

Charles Fort worked smack in the middle of a popular genre. The early decades of the 20th century saw a plethora of stories about the upper atmosphere, the region just beyond the reach of crewed balloons or airplanes. With the coming of machines capable of reaching those places, in the years around World War II, these tales would move deeper into space. But for several decades, the focus was nearer Earth: "the realm of the air," as the meteorologist Charles Fitzhugh Talman called it. There were stories of air serpents and bat-like creatures, of strange races inhabiting sky islands. In 1913, as Fort struggled with his first non-fiction works, Arthur Conan Doyle published "The Horror of the Heights", about an aviator investigating pilots who'd died trying to set new altitude records. Forty thousand feet above the Earth, the hero discovers, are jungles populated by creatures, snakelike or resembling jellyfish or with beaks and tentacles like squid: as though the upper air were an ocean and pilots making their way through a kelp forest. Fort's description of a Super-Sargasso Sea, in which could be found the flotsam and jetsam that occasionally rain down and, perhaps as well, the monstrous owners of the Earth, meshed neatly with this convention.

Doyle's tale, like many scientific romances, was presented as truth, written as if taken from a recovered diary fragment.


Nat. Long


DOUBT
THE FORTEAN SOCIETY MAGAZINE
EDITED BY
TIFFANY THAYER
doubt
HELP THE BLIND!
"Science does not know its debt to imagination" EMERSON
SCIENCE-STRUGGLING-EVER UPWARD-TOWARDS-THE-STARS

ABOVE: The changing face of *Doubt*. **BELOW:** Meteorologist Charles Fitzhugh Talman dismissed Fort's ideas and scoffed at Thayer's offer of Fortean Society membership.

Still, readers were presumed to understand it was fiction; it was published in a magazine of fiction, after all. Fort was more intent than his genre peers to blur fact and fiction. He worked with the same fictional tropes, but presented his ideas without the trappings of fiction. Digging through newspapers, scientific journals, and magazines, he uncovered genuine reports of strange objects in the sky, which he then offered as evidence for his philosophising and what seemed to be genuine scientific speculations. "Extra-mundane voyagers," Fort suggested in *New Lands*. The early 20th century, he implied, was not so different from 1492, when residents of North America had watched three craft approaching over the horizon.

Fort's playing at the boundary between fiction and nonfiction reflected a general cultural confusion: how could one make sense of the upper atmosphere and the spaces just beyond it? Were the romances of Doyle and others pure imagination, or did they point toward the possible? Talman, the meteorologist, dismissed Fort and anyone else who failed to distinguish scientific romance from fact. He laid claim to expertise about all "variety of phenomena and appearances in the atmosphere". Such things fell under the technical definition of "meteor," not just shooting stars, he said, and he was a scientist who vouchsafed the truth about such matters. His first published writing, in 1900, debunked fancies about Martian civilisations; more than 40 years later, he scoffed at Thayer's offering him membership in the Fortean Society. But Fortean speculation on extramundane life could not be so easily dismissed. Just as Fort's *The Book of the Damned* was published, in December 1919, Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the radio, claimed to have detected signals from Mars.

Talk of celestial seas, atmospheric jungles, and Martian civilisations was astounding, but also cosy: the Solar System was small and connected; easily travelled, as Fort wrote in *New Lands*, traversed in a matter of days. Pay no attention to the likes of Talman, Fort said, and his cosmological theories about the vastness of the atmosphere and space. Meteorology was, with astronomy, the epitome of hubristic science. Back in the 1770s, French peasants insisted that they'd seen stones fall from the sky, illuminated and hot, but savants, insisting that the Earth was unconnected to the rest of the cosmos, dismissed the reports as popular delusions; the stones had not fallen, but had been hit by lightning. And so, for a century, meteors were damned, until scientists finally admitted that, yes, stones fall from the heavens.

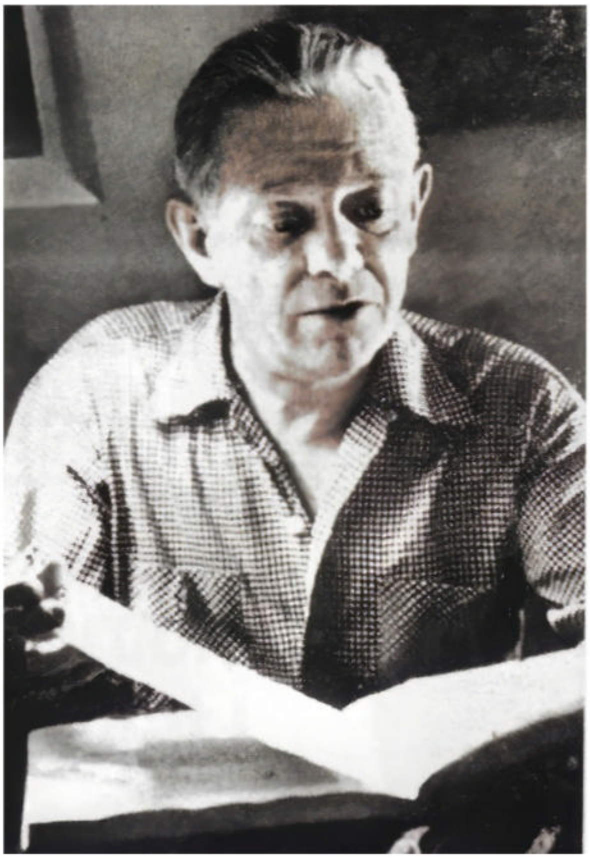
WHO COULD TRUST METEOROLOGISTS AND THEIR ARROGANT EXPLANATIONS?

Who could trust meteorologists and their arrogant explanations? The Universe was not an unimaginable fastness, rather a tidy space that a stone could cross, as if thrown by a poltergeist, some "sly afreet," in the words of one fortean. In late 1944, Allied pilots reported seeing oval things darting about them; "foo fighters", they came to be called. Not quite a year and a half later, observers in Nordic countries told of "ghost rockets" streaking across the heavens. Hardly more than a year after that, the world was introduced to flying saucers.

What to make of the anomalous sightings was as difficult, as controversial a question in the 1940s as it had been in decades past. Poet Kenneth Rexroth thought them projections of subconscious mechanisms onto the screen of the firmament: reflections of the self, not real objects. Other commentators also explained accounts of atmospheric anomalies as psychological, though in a different sense: they expressed anxieties about the modern world and the death that had rained from above in both world wars, worries that grew almost unbearable with the atomic bombing of Japan and the brinksmanship of the Cold War. Fort's (and others') argument that these things should be taken literally, as visitors from some other place, opened new interpretive possibilities. Perhaps the focus should be not on how the mind works but on the universe of objects.

Or perhaps these visitors proved correct yet another science fiction prophecy. Science fictioneers had accurately predicted atomic weaponry and, against the scorn of scientists, held on to the idea that rocketry was the science of the future. Now, it seemed, they had been right to obsess over objects in the high atmosphere and space voyagers. They had discovered yet another piece of history's motor. If humanity could but gain control of these things, who knew what powers might follow? Humanity might soon learn the secret of interstellar travel. Or perhaps the powers might be not material and scientific, but spiritual. Perhaps they portended a New Age, escorts to the next stage of evolution.

The Fortean Society included partisans of all these perspectives – and more too; a bevy of explanations. It was preadapted to the com-



LEFT: Thayer in 1956, aged 54. By the 1950s he had concluded that UFOs were essentially a psy-op by the US intelligence agencies to increase defence spending. **BELOW:** While Thayer's *Doubt* cast the saucers as part of a wider conspiracy theory, popular magazines like *Fate* helped imprint them on public consciousness in their familiar form.

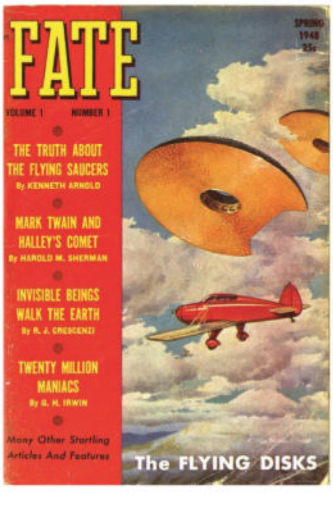
ing of flying saucers, ghost rockets, and foo fighters, prepared with explanations and categories of analysis. The flying saucer subculture would always be broader than the fortean community, and an adversarial relationship would develop between it and Thayer.

UNITED STATES OF DREAMLAND

Flying saucers ballasted the fortean community for the rest of the run of the society's official magazine, *Doubt*, and Thayer was not happy about that fact, coming in time to wonder if the reports were part of a new conspiracy and if forteans were dupes or, worse, co-conspirators. Hundreds of clippings about flying saucers inundated the society's post office box at Grand Central Station each month – 306 between July and October 1950; 281 between June and October 1952 – as did Air Force reports and book and magazine articles from *Life* and *Harper's* and *True* and *Argosy* and the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Reader's Digest* and *Fate*. Thayer received letters, often long and abstruse in their reasoning. Some of what clogged the mailbox was technical and dry, some Theosophical space opera, some only tenuously connected to flying discs at all. In 1947, 1949, 1953, and 1957, issues of *Doubt* offered extensive coverage of UFOs.

But members were not pleased by Thayer's coverage of the topic: it still wasn't enough. One member, Norman Markham, sent in long letters elaborating on his theories – "You should see his bulging folders in the archives!!!" Thayer said in 1949 – but Thayer printed only a fraction and responded to less. The flying saucer reports continued through the 1950s, and Thayer became increasingly irritable; his interest in the Fortean Society lapsed as his contempt for its members grew.

He eventually developed what science fiction writer L Sprague de Camp called (borrowing a term from author Robert Heinlein) a "devil theory." Or, rather, two devil theories, for Thayer's initial understanding of the conspiracy behind the flying saucer reports changed after 1947, his new view then reinforced over the years through selective reading. In both formulations, the problem was that the press, in concert with the world's governments, had created a false reality in which most people lived – not him, of course, clear-sighted, open-eyed, awake in the United States of Dreamland. What changed was Thayer's understanding of the conspiracy's aims, and the conspiracists relation to the discs.



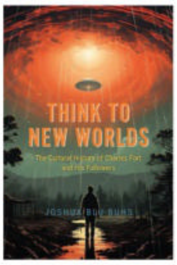
Originally, he thought the press was opposed to saucers, resentful that everyday people should take a stand against science, like those French peasants in possession of meteors. A small elite controlled the media, which accredited some things as true, discredited others as false. The press, he believed, had hidden that the attack on Pearl Harbor was coordinated with the Roosevelt administration and had invented the myths of the atom and of the atomic bomb. Now, people were reporting lights and objects in the sky that defied scientific explanation, and so they had to be ridiculed, deemed hysterical, in order to protect the dream against reality.

By late 1950 or very early 1951, Thayer revised his opinion: far from threatening mainstream powers, flying saucers were pawns in their game of global control. He offered this idea, at first, with a fortean sense of proportion, but soon enough gave in to certainty. How could stories about discs continue to appear in the papers, more than three years after Arnold's sighting, accompanied by appreciative comments about Fort, if they truly threatened the powers-that-be?

For some reason, the powerful wanted newspapers to fill their pages with articles on UFOs. "The only agency known which could command the space and time, the brains, paper and ink, devoted to this topic since it began is the Office of Strategic Services in Washington, DC," he said, referring to the bureau that would become the Central Intelligence Agency. "There the world's future is planned for at least three generations to come. There is decided what the newspapers are to print when. There is decided every question of peace or war or life or death for millions of people – strategically."

The point of all this plotting, Thayer thought, was to justify defence spending. "About 90%" of saucer reports were provided by Pentagon press agents, he said, and even the brass's scoffing was a way to keep the story going. Thayer concluded that the reports had helped avert World War III, which he had once presumed inevitable. The Soviets and the Allies had agreed to abstain from military engagement and use "interplanetary defence" as "the new boondoggle." Billions of taxpayer dollars would be funnelled into this new battle. Infuriating, but "it beats killing 18-year-old kids. Even the Senators must like it better."

Eventually, Thayer came to see flying saucers as a prologue to the more odious Sputnik conspiracy. Stories about discs being tracked by radar served to gauge the public's willingness to believe that objects could be tracked through the high atmosphere and near space. If the masses were convinced that aerial craft could be followed by machines on the ground, that lights in the atmosphere could be explained as technological objects moving through space, then they could be hoodwinked into believing media reports that a human-made satellite had been launched, was being monitored, and could even be seen by the naked eye at particular times in particular places. A pacifist, Thayer was getting the peace he'd long advocated for, but at the price of widespread imbecility. He was willing to pay the cost "as long as it's the other fellow's brain they wash and not my own." Thayer would not pledge his allegiance to the United States of America, nor to the United States of Dreamland.



Adapted and excerpted from *Think to New Worlds: The Cultural History of Charles Fort and His Followers* by Joshua Blu Buhs. © 2024 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

JOSHUA BLUH BUHS is the author of *Bigfoot: The Life and Times of a Legend* and *The Fire Ant Wars: Nature, Science, and Public Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, both published by the University of Chicago Press.

MYSTERY MONKS & VANISHING NUNS

MORE FROM MERSEYSIDE & HALSALL MOSS

The indefatigible **ROB GANDY** heads backs to some old haunts to collect further tales of phantom hooded figures on the roads of Halsall Moss and spine-tingling encounters with spectral sisters in various locations around Merseyside...

RAGGEDSTONE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

As regular FT readers will know, I have been collecting and recording people's testimonies of genuinely weird first- and second-hand experiences for several years now. I am delighted to say that this spring has not run dry and continues to flow. When writing them up for *Fortean Times* I will always try and group them around a particular theme or geographical area. This article focuses on Merseyside and Halsall Moss, adjacent areas which I have written about in the past (**FT328:32-39; FT370:42-45; FT371:40-44; FT382:38-43**). As I have lived on Merseyside for over 40 years it is probably easier for me to pick up on stories from this area; when people I talk to realise my interest, they will often suggest I contact someone they know who has had a similar experience.

The stories below extend the number of road ghosts spotted on or near Halsall Moss; and as I have referred to previous cases with a letter, ranging from A to M, I continue this practice. This means that I now have 16 specified cases. Interestingly, several of them relate in some way to monks and nuns. I do not read anything into this, merely note the fact.

Phantom Jaywalker (Case N)

It would have been before 2005 that Bill and Cynthia (pseudonyms) were returning home from a trip to Southport in the early evening. Bill drove their car down Southport Road (A570) and turned left onto Smithy Lane. They travelled along at around 30 miles per hour (48km/h) in clear daylight. As they were approaching a spot where there is a series of bungalows they both saw a person walking across the road in front of them from the left.

They were pretty close – not close enough to hit him or her – but on reaching the middle of the road the person suddenly and completely disappeared. Both Bill and Cynthia were stunned and could not explain what they had seen. They noticed that there was a car parked at the side of the road, but this was not near enough for anyone to hide behind. To this day they puzzle over what happened.

Vanishing Monks? (Cases O & P)

One drizzly evening in the 1990s, around dusk, Angela (pseudonym) was driving home from work up Pinfold Lane in Scarisbrick towards the main Southport Road (A570). As she approached Pinfold Lane School, which is on the right-hand corner with the main road, she spotted a man wearing what appeared to be a brown hoodie and long coat walking alongside the school wall towards her. Her immediate reaction was that he looked like the sort who was "up to no good" and she so kept a careful eye on him. But as she came very close to him she was shocked to see him take a sharp turn away from her and disappear *through* the school's brick wall! There was clearly no gateway, or anything similar, and so Angela was left flummoxed by the event.

She mentioned her experience when she was visiting her Uncle Ron's (pseudonym) house in nearby Renacres Lane, on Halsall Moss. He immediately said: "So you have seen the monk as well!?" When she asked what he was talking about, he told her the story of what happened to him and some friends one night in the early 1960s.

Ron was about 18 years of age at the time and it was around 11pm when their car was heading up Pinfold Lane. They were not as near to Southport Road as Angela had been, and had just passed a farm on the left and were near the site of an old quarry. What they saw looked like a monk in a long brown habit, perhaps with a cloak, which went down to the ground. He was walking towards them on the opposite side of the road. Ron and his friends were all struck by the sight of this monk and immediately looked around when their car went past him. But when they looked, he had vanished into thin air! As in Angela's experience, there was nowhere (and no time) for the person to have gone to get off the road.

Upon hearing this, Angela realised that what she had taken as being a man in a brown hoodie and long coat was not that different to what a monk looks like. Had Angela seen the same thing as her Uncle Ron?

Whether or not it *was* a monk, or someone dressed as a monk, or something else entirely, it is a remarkable coincidence that two members of the same family witnessed something so strange on the same stretch of road so many years apart…

SOUTHPORT ROAD
PINFOLD LANE

PINFOLD SCHOOL

ABOVE: Pinfold School, on the corner of Pinfold Lane, the location for two sightings of a 'phantom monk' made by two members of the same family years apart. **BELOW:** Ince Blundell Hall in an engraving of 1818.

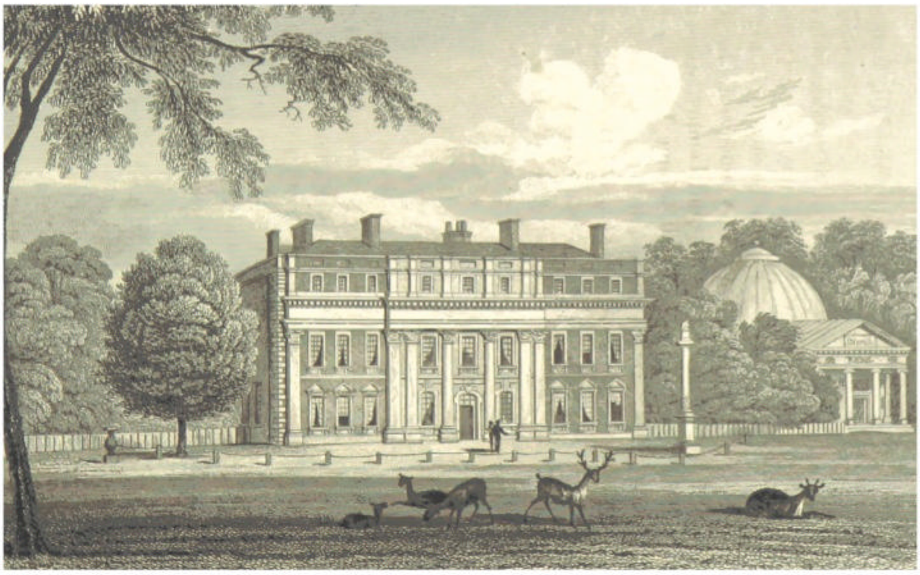
THE NUN TURNED AROUND AND WALKED STRAIGHT THROUGH THE WALL

Nuns Walking Through Walls

The Augustinian Nursing Sisters run Ince Blundell Hall nursing home. So it is no surprise to see some nuns, in their mainly dark habits, in the area. The nursing home estate is surrounded by a brick wall around 5ft 6in (167cm) high; this is reflected in the name of one of the adjacent roads – Park Wall Road. Some of the land inside the wall is actively used as farmland, which is close by two commercial fishing ponds. In 2013 or 2014 one of the farmers was busy in his combine harvester on the farmland. It was between 1.30am and 2.00am and the night was pitch black, the farmer being guided in his work by his headlights. At one point he turned the machine around and there, about 100 yards ahead in front of him, was a nun standing by the side of the smaller fishing pond. As he watched, the nun turned around and then walked straight through the brick wall! Needless to say, he was shocked, as he knew that there was no door or other means by which the nun could have disappeared in this way.

More recently, in either 2017 or 2018, one of the farmer's colleagues had been collecting night fishing fees and was waiting for a taxi home from the bottom of Carr Side Lane. It was 11pm as he saw a nun walking along Park Wall Road on the opposite side of the road towards the nursing home. Idly, he watched her, but then saw her take a sharp turn and vanish into and through the wall. Again, there was no door or other means by which the nun could have disappeared from the road.

So is there a history of local spectral nuns? Well, actually there is. Around 1990, the farmer's brother-in-law was driving along Park Wall Road towards Formby when he saw a nun come *out* from the wall, causing him



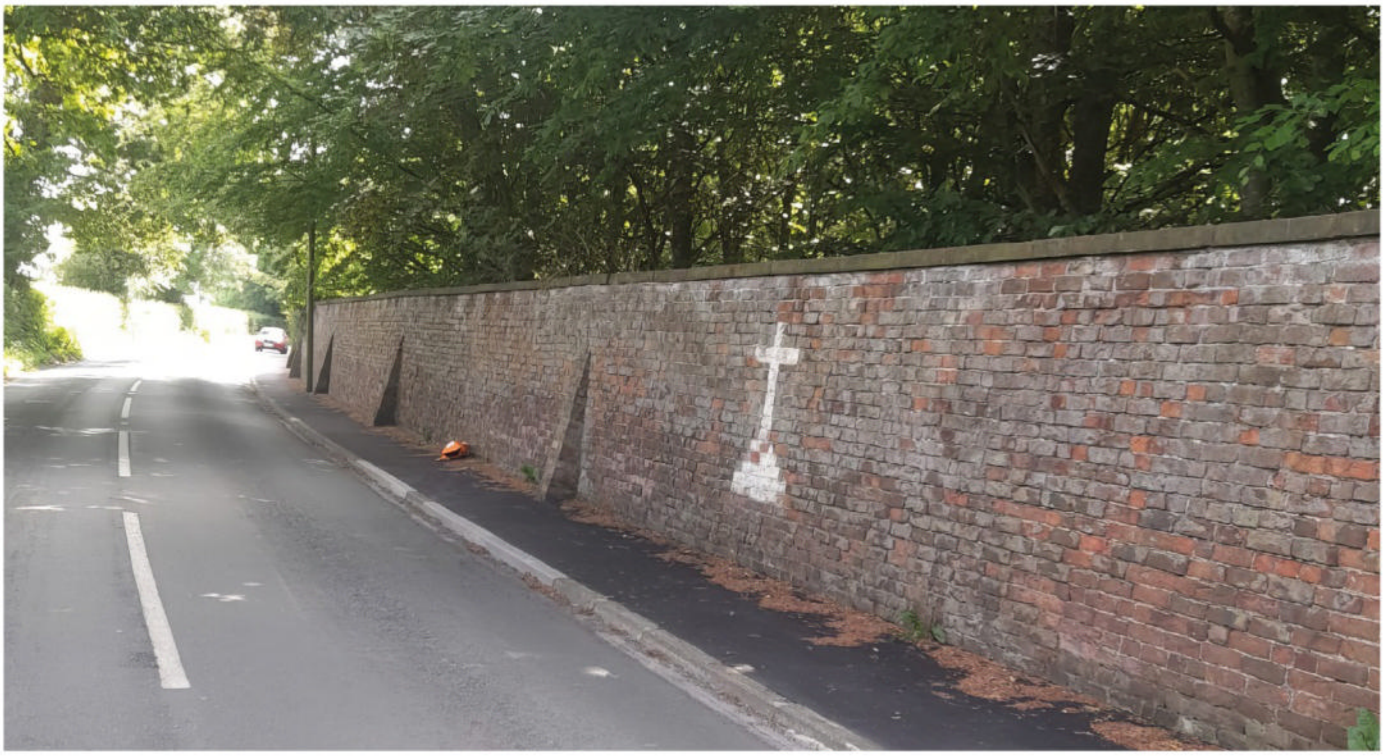
PAUL FELIX PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY

to brake. When he looked in his rear-view mirror the nun was standing in the middle of the road looking at him! Needless to say, he carried on and got away as quickly as he could. The farmer added that there have been many times that he and others have been on Park Wall Road and had the feeling that they were being watched. Also, he described how, when he was 17 years old, he was in the fields near to Scarisbrick Hall when he saw a man dressed in the sort of clothing a late-19th century farmer might wear, striding purposefully across the field. He only got worried when the man then appeared to walk straight through the very high wire-netting fence, which is made even more secure with added barbed wire.

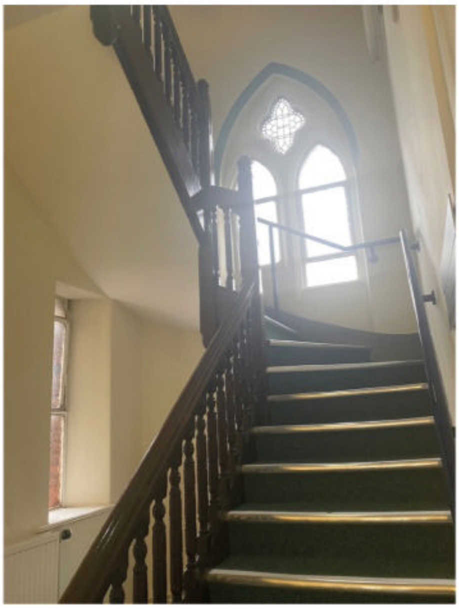
I mentioned these cases of nuns walking through walls to 'David Barton' who lives in nearby Formby (**FT371:40-44**), but asked him to treat them as being 'in strict confidence'. He soon got back to me to say that he had had a visit from a local builder, who is a long-term Formby resident. Quite by chance, this man mentioned Ince Blundell, and so David related the story about the 'Gatehouse Ghost' (**FT382:38-43**). The builder said that lots of people had seen a spectre crossing the A565 road in the past, but to David's great surprise he then added it might be the nun. The builder mentioned that around the rear of the estate, on Park Wall Road, there is a large white cross painted on the wall (see picture). He said that he was always told that something bad had happened to a nun there many years ago and that the cross was painted on the wall at the spot where whatever had happened took place.

In the circumstances, I approached the nursing home to enquire about the painted cross. One of the Sisters kindly explained that historically there was a mediæval wayside cross where funeral processions used to halt for rest and prayer when en route to Sefton Village Church with a corpse for burial. A very long time ago, circumstances made it necessary for the long wall to be built, which meant that the site of the cross was now actually *inside* the wall. The white painted cross on the wall marks the position closest to the cross, thereby enabling processions to still stop and pray if they so wish. She was uncertain about whether the cross is still there, and what state it might be in, if it is. I thanked her for her help. [1]

What this serves to illustrate is that when people see something out-of-the-ordinary (in this case a white cross painted on a wall) they will try and find an explanation, and, in the absence of the full facts, will often come up with the most interesting (i.e. sensational) story. This will then get handed down the generations and become part of local folklore, as is clearly the case here.


DAVID ADAMS

TOP: Ince Blundell Hall today is a nursing home run by the Augustinian Nursing Sisters. **ABOVE:** The spot on Park Wall Road where a white painted cross marks the location near where a mediæval wayside cross used to stand, although more sinister stories have also attached themselves to it.



ABOVE LEFT: The John Foster Building, once a Catholic college run by the Sisters of Notre Dame. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The staircase where Susan saw a ghostly nun.

Nuns Walking Down Stairs?

On 19 November 2018 Susan (pseudonym) was in the John Foster Building of Liverpool John Moores University, which is situated at the top of the city's Mount Pleasant. She had been at a meeting with someone who had been particularly talkative, meaning that it was around 8.15pm when they had finished. Her colleague had left and so she was alone. Putting on her coat and scarf, she decided to visit the bathroom before setting off home. Her route took her from the ground floor office where the interview was held, up to the first floor using the nearest staircase, and along the well-lit corridor past a small set of stairs (going up to the second floor) towards the female bathrooms. Next to the female bathrooms there is a disabled toilet, and as she walked past it the lights and the hand dryer suddenly turned themselves on! This naturally spooked her, as there was no one to be seen, and so she used the bathroom as quickly as possible.

Walking back down the corridor Susan again came to the stairs up to the second floor, where there is a small stained glass window on the landing (see picture). She caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye and when she turned to look she realised that there was a tall figure standing by the window at the top of the stairs. The figure was slightly shorter than 6ft (1.8m), and was wearing a baggy one-piece garment that was completely dark blue, almost black, and appeard "robe-like". There was something covering its head, which draped the face slightly, but not enough to hide it. By the shape of its frame it definitely seemed to be female. Its arms were by its side and it wasn't holding anything. It didn't move, but it looked directly at Susan; she felt that it didn't want her to be there. She studied the figure for some three to four seconds before deciding discretion was the better part of valour; she rapidly made her way to the exit and left the building, not turning to look back. I asked Susan if perhaps the figure that she saw could have involved an element of pareidolia, with the shape of the window being inadvertently misinterpreted. Her response was that she "definitely looked at the figure for too long for it to be just the window".

IT LOOKED DIRECTLY AT SUSAN. SHE FELT THAT IT DIDN'T WANT HER TO BE THERE

Did Susan see a ghostly nun on the stairs? Who is to say? But the John Foster Building is a Grade II-listed structure dating back to the mid-19th century and was formerly a Catholic teacher training college run by the Sisters of Notre Dame. There have long been rumours that the spirits of the nuns still inhabit the building.

The Child In A Blue-White Haze

Back in late 2003, just before Christmas, 19-year-old Mr S of Waterloo was staying overnight with friends in Crosby, just off Brooke Road near the Brooke pub. Sometime between 1.00am and 3.00am he woke and needed to go to the bathroom, which was down the hall. After a couple of minutes he left the bathroom and was alone in the hallway, outside the bathroom door facing a bedroom. He looked towards the top of the stairs, which led down, where he could see a child sitting with its back towards him on the top step. The child seemed to be in something of a blue/white haze, but the features were definitely clear enough to make out the details: it was a girl in a Victorian-style frilly dress with bows and ringlets in her hair. There was no sound and the girl never turned around, she just remained sitting and facing down the stairs. Mr S looked carefully at her and took in all the detail, at which point he decided he was seeing something supernatural and shot off back down the hall to his bedroom.

The next day he mentioned what he had seen and was told by the house owners that many years earlier they had hired a Spiritualist to come to the house and look into some strange happenings. The Spiritualist said that there was a spirit/ghost of a girl called Sarah who had died years before when the area was marshland (which could explain the Victorian clothing). The story was that she had run away and drowned in the marshes and that she had a dislike of men. The Spiritualist said if they left a gift for the ghost, then it would go away. They had left a Christmas present on the tree for the ghost as suggested by the Spiritualist (Mr S thinks they said it was a doll, but he is not 100 per cent certain). Then one day the present fell off the tree of its own accord – and the ghost had never come back. That is to say that the ghost had never come back until Mr S witnessed it! Mr S subsequently checked and found that the two-storey, semi-detached house was probably built in the 1920s or 1930s, prior to which the plot was woodland and marshland.

Later in the winter of 2003/04, Mr S again stayed overnight in the same house. He awoke from his sleep in the early hours, with it being cold and dark outside. He was facing the bay window of the bedroom when he realised that he could see the same ghost – it was crouched down by the window looking straight at him, making no sound. There was the same blue/white haze around the girl as with the first sighting, and she was wearing

LEFT: The now demolished Brooke Hotel, Crosby. **BELOW:** Lower Heswall on the Wirral.

the same clothes and had the same hair style. Mr S would guess that she was somewhere between eight and 12 years old. He remembers her face, which was neither happy nor sad, and has a recollection that she might even have put a finger to her lips to make a silent 'shhhhh' sign to him, but can't be sure given how long ago it happened. Half asleep, he reached out to poke the ghost to see what it was, when his hand touched the metal frame of a shelving unit next to the bed. It was the feel of the cold metal on his hand that made him realise that he definitely was awake and not dreaming. He looked away at the shelf for a second to see what had caused the cold sensation; but when he looked back, the ghost was gone. He never saw it again after that.

NURSERY TIMES

Mark grew up in Lower Heswall on the Wirral peninsula, along with his mother, father and brother. The family home was at the rear of his father's one-acre nursery in Village Road. From the living-room window, which overlooked the nursery, a figure – apparently a man in a coat – had been occasionally witnessed walking up the sloping path that led down to the nursery, as if coming to the house, only for no one to be found when whomever had seen the figure went into the next room to answer the door. This had happened more than once to every member of the family.

There was really nowhere he could have gone so quickly between being seen from the living room window and passing the door to the house, round to one side; there was a chest-high wall with bushes immediately beyond it on the other side of the path as it turned the corner, and a continuing wall to the left with bushes on higher ground rooted on its top. Mark's father had several greenhouses and it was speculated that there was some refraction effect which applied if someone walked on a particular line in the village; but no one in the family could ever work out the detail of how this might happen. The most spectacular sighting occurred at night during a torrential rain-storm in 1979 when Mark's brother happened to be next to the door and saw the figure through a small window at the corner of the house, and thus much closer up than usual; he opened the door and sprang out to confront the entity, but there was no one there. He described the figure as a tallish elderly man wearing a beige coat with the collar turned up; the coat appeared dry despite the heavy rain which had been falling for some time (and there were no other buildings close by from which anyone could have come quickly enough to remain dry). The brother (who was 21 at the time) is (and was then) even more of a 'materialist' than Mark, but on this occasion he was shaken by his inability to explain his experience. As the living-room curtains were closed, nobody else saw the figure.

The figure would appear mostly in the early evening when it was still light outside and the curtains still open, although it did appear at other times. An influence on sightings was the fact that it was mostly at weekends that the family were in the living-room in the daytime (except for when the mother was doing housework); so there were few sightings in the daytime during the week. Nevertheless, sightings could take place any time of year and in all weathers. The sightings were made over an extended period; Mark thinks that this covered the late 1960s to the 1980s, or even later. He cannot remember exactly the last time anyone saw the figure, given that he was mostly away from home at university from 1974 to 1982, and moved away permanently from 1982. The family sold the house after the mother died in 2011, so it is not known if there have been any more recent sightings.

CONCLUSIONS

It is always a delight to receive new testimonies, and the sincerity of the witnesses is always striking. Sometimes there are clusters – I didn't expect so many links to monks and nuns with these ones – and sometimes there aren't; so it is important to try and avoid drawing false correlations. I am currently looking into claims of a ghostly Mini Clubman that appears stationary in the road, just around a corner on Scaffold Lane near Ince Blundell, causing drivers to take evasive action and crash; of course, they find that the Mini Clubman has vanished into thin air when they look back! Also I am trying to find out how this road got such a sinister name, which is unique in Great Britain.[2] No doubt further fortean phenomena will come to light across the area – I certainly hope so!

NOTES

[1] I specifically did not ask the Sister about the alleged sightings of ghostly nuns walking through walls. In my opinion, this would have been inappropriate.

[2] www.streetlist.co.uk/l/l38/l38-5/scaffold-lane

➡ **ROB GANDY** is a Visiting Professor at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, and a regular contributor to FT. A lifelong fortean, he has eclectic interests in all things weird, including phantom hitchhikers, ghosts and time slips.

DAVID HARRIS / ALAMY STOCK

The Devil's Marmite tree

TED HARRISON traces the monkey puzzle tree's journey from South America to Britain and the stories attached to it...

There's a church in a remote part of mid-Wales surrounded by a circular graveyard bounded by a wall containing several huge upright standing stones. The whole site suggests an ancient and possibly pre-Christian sacred history.

Ysbyty Cynfyn, as its Welsh name attests, was once an overnight resting place for pilgrims on their way to the Cistercian monastery at Strata Florida, about 12 miles (19km) away. Today it stands beside a lonely road two miles north of the village of Devil's Bridge.

The church building, dedicated to St John the Baptist, is only 200 years old. However, it is the graveyard that is of special interest. It was once used for holding fairs and for long-outlawed rustic sports such as cock fighting. There's an interesting grave recording the birth and death of Britain's first known quadruplets.

Yet most intriguing of all, the churchyard is home to no fewer than five monkey puzzle trees – the Chilean *Araucaria araucana*, which were first seen in Britain at the end of the 18th century and in folklore quickly earned a reputation as 'the Devil's Tree'.

LEFT: A churchyard monkey puzzle in Winsham, Somerset.

NICK CHIPCHASE / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

> *The churchyard is home to no fewer than five Monkey Puzzle trees*

Various superstitions, or urban myths, became established in several parts of Britain, from Manchester to Cambridgeshire and Swansea. Parents, it is said, told their children to remain silent as they passed a monkey puzzle. Different reasons were given: to make a noise would bring bad luck; it might cause them to lose something valuable; or they might even grow a monkey's tail! The Devil, some said, lived atop the trees from where he would survey the surroundings. There is an old Fenland belief that planting a monkey puzzle on the edge of a graveyard would prevent the Devil from entering during a burial and snatching the soul of the departed.

Perhaps the explanation for the superstitions is far more mundane. It is possible, suggests the Woodland Trust, that this story of the Devil living in the tree was invented by concerned parents trying to stop their children climbing the spiky branches: early health and safety advice. Or maybe parents were glad of a respite from the noise, squabbling and chatter of their offspring and used the tree as an excuse. But why this particular tree?

It is certainly distinctive and stands out as alien amongst the native flora. And when it was first brought to Britain from South America 200 years ago, it probably came not just as a botanical curiosity, but already with stories attached.

When the firsts seeds for the gardens and collections of Europe were sent east from Chile, the local stories about the tree may have made the same journey in letters or as travellers' tales. On arrival, the tales would have been retold, no doubt with mistakes and embellishments, giving the tree an added air of mystery. For the tree, known locally as *pewen*, is sacred to many of the indigenous people, the Mapuche, living on the slopes of the Andes. The sacredness survives into modern times: the *Santiago Times* reported considerable local opposition in 2013 when it was proposed to fell eight holy trees to widen a road.

It is not unusual in many traditional societies for plants and animals that provide food and sustenance to be granted a sacred status, and to the Mapuche the fruits of the *pewen* provide a valued food source, with nuts that can be eaten raw or cooked, ground into flour or even fermented to produce the traditional alcoholic drink called *muday* used in religious ceremnonies. In addition to being edible, the seeds were used by tribal healers, the Machi, to provide medicines. The Machi would also intercede with the family deities in the *pewen* groves, where the sacred trees enabled humans to come into contact with the spirit world and find inner peace.

However, only the ripe seeds can be harvested, according to some stories, for to pick them unripe angers the spirits living in the trees; parallels here, perhaps, with stories of the Devil inhabiting the monkey puzzle that developed in Britain.

When the trees were first imported to Britain they became fashionable and exotic accessories for estates and grand gardens. Yet from early on they also were frequently planted in churchyards. The oldest monkey puzzle in Llandeilo churchyard, Carmarthenshire, for instance, dates back to 1868.

Were monkey puzzles simply gifted to the Church by a rich estate owner for the status it conferred, or was there some other, under-acknowledged superstitious motive at play – to deter the Devil from entering the consecrated ground? Chapel congregations too, generally less likely to be endowed by the landed classes, also planted the trees. Libanus Chapel at Waunclynda, Carmarthenshire, has three fine 19th century examples. Wales, of course, has an ancient tradition of regarding some trees as sacred, dating back to Pagan times and the oak groves of the Druids.

From the late 19th century the trees became popular in suburban middle-class gardens. Sea captains and traders, bringing the seeds back from South America, and local nurseries that grew them on, likely encouraged the exotic tales to boost sales.

The tree, now endangered in its native Chile, has a striking appearance and is unlike any native European species. Its base resembles an elephant's foot and its branches are covered with razor-sharp leaves. Hence the story that to climb the tree would even be a puzzle for a monkey. The species is also little-evolved over hundreds of millions of years and the sharp leaves probably developed not to deter monkeys but dinosaurs in Mesozoic times, 250 million years ago. Some European gardeners call it 'the Marmite' tree as, they say, it divides opinion – you love it or hate it.

It is not surprising that such a strange and ancient tree, planted in a new land an ocean away from its natural habitat, has attracted to itself some strange and sinister tales...

TED HARRISON is a former BBC religious affairs correspondent, writer, artist and regular FT contributor.

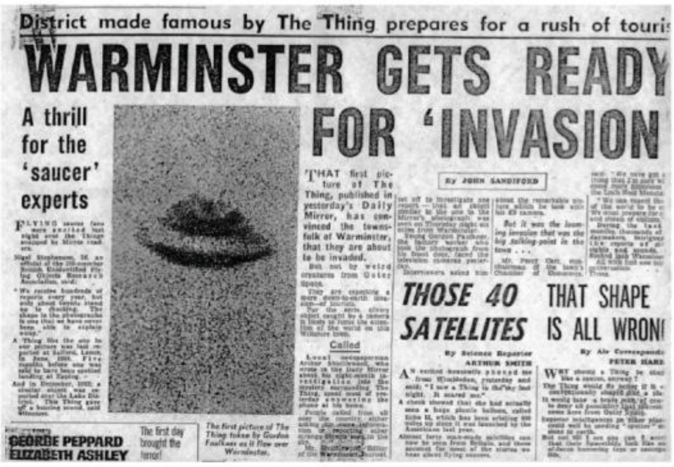
“A little too much UFOing going on”?

Are ghost hunters missing the bigger picture? Do UFO researchers filter out other anomalies? PETER A McCUE suggests that we sometimes need to look at weirdness in the round.

There seems to be a lot of overlap between supposedly different types of anomalous phenomena. For example, starting in the mid-1960s, and continuing until about 1977, the Warminster area of Wiltshire generated numerous reports of UFO sightings, although claims about strange phenomena thereabouts weren’t confined to aerial manifestations.[1] There were, for instance, reports about people hearing mysterious footsteps, and of vehicles colliding with human-like figures, but with no casualties being found. However, the Warminster case is controversial, with some commentators suggesting that prosaic factors, such as the misinterpretation of ordinary aerial objects and sensationalist news reporting can explain what allegedly occurred (not to mention hoaxing; see **FT331:40-47**). But if a substantial number of the reports were true, the locality may have been, at least temporarily, a hot spot for weird phenomena of various types. If so, one might ask whether the different types of manifestation were related to one another by anything other than ‘geographical coincidence’.

The case of the Skinwalker Ranch in Utah provides a more compelling reason for believing that there is an intrinsic connection between superficially different types of anomalous phenomena. Over the years, the property has reportedly been the setting for a wide array of occurrences, such as UFO sightings, cattle mutilations and poltergeist-type manifestations (see **FT169:44-47, 363:38-41, 398:21**). Visitors to the ranch, and people who have worked there, have reportedly experienced ‘contagion’ effects – being ‘followed home’ by strange phenomena (see **FT438:30-35**).[2] One of them, a female defence analyst, visited the property (in 2009, it seems). She and Dr Colm Kelleher had a brief sighting of a strange creature. Subsequently, the woman was plagued by disturbing phenomena at her hitherto quiet home, with poltergeist-type activity continuing there for some years.

Jenny Randles relates an interesting story told to her by a Jane Hayes (pseudonym).[3] It concerned an incident in 1948 when Hayes and three others were camping in a small wood near Stocksbridge, close to the Sheffield conurbation (see **FT388:40**). The campers were in their tent when, alarmingly, they heard what sounded like a horse galloping straight towards them. However, the noise stopped when it reached the tent. But when the campers went out to look, there were no hoofmarks in the soft earth. Hayes subsequently learned from local farmers that they’d often seen lights in the wood, but without finding any explanation when they went to investigate. Some 10 years after the camping incident, Hayes and her young son saw a circle of lights hovering over a reservoir behind the woods. They winked out, but Randles doesn’t say for how long they were in view.



District made famous by The Thing prepares for a rush of touris

WARMINSTER GETS READY FOR ‘INVASION

A thrill for the ‘saucer’ experts

By JOHN SANDIFORD

THAT first picture of The Thing, published in yesterday’s Daily Mirror, has convinced the townsfolk of Warminster, that they are about to be invaded.

But not by weird creatures from Outer Space.

Called

THOSE 40 SATELLITES

By Science Reporter ARTHUR SMITH

THAT SHAPE IS ALL WRON

By Air Correspond PETER HARE

The first picture of The Thing taken by Gordon Faulkner as it flew over Warminster.

GEORGE PEPPARD ELIZABETH ASHLEY The first day brought the terror!

Some 20 years ago, a middle-aged man informed me about anomalous phenomena that he’d experienced.[4] They included a succession of haunting or poltergeist-type manifestations at a first-floor flat that he’d occupied for six years in the 1990s. He went on to experience phenomena in other flats as well. And he also described UFO experiences, two of which occurred when he was with a female friend, whom I got to speak to. In respect of the first of these shared UFO incidents, the couple experienced a period of amnesia, a phenomenon often dubbed ‘missing time’.

Cases such as these, featuring phenomena from supposedly

ABOVE: Certain places have garnered reputations as ‘hot spots’ for a wide variety of anomalous phenomena. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Warminster area of Wiltshire (left) was a much-reported focus for weird goings-on, while the 1990s and 2000s brought accounts of high strangeness from Utah’s Skinwalker Ranch (right).

LEFT: The Scottish town of Bonnybridge and its surroundings became a UFO 'window area' in the early 1990s.

different categories, could be far more common than people realise. Therefore, my advice to investigators of ghostly phenomena would be to ask wide-ranging questions – to enquire whether the witnesses have experienced *other* strange things, such as UFO sightings or cryptid encounters. Conversely, I would advise researchers to ask UFO witnesses whether they have had experiences of the haunting, poltergeist or cryptid type. If they aren't questioned, explicitly, about such matters, witnesses might be reluctant to divulge the full range of their experiences – perhaps out of a fear of being disbelieved, or because they think that some of their anomalous experiences lie outside the investigator's area of interest.

There's clearly a considerable demand for paranormal fare, whether it be in the form of books, articles, documentaries, podcasts or 'reality TV' shows. While some consumers may be generalists who find pretty much the whole of the paranormal spectrum interesting and entertaining, others may be more like *à la carte* diners with definite preferences. The Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP) hosts weekly webinars that go out live. They're normally recorded and then made available on ASSAP's YouTube channel.[5] In January 2024, ASSAP's secretary, Claire Davy, sent a post to the association's Facebook group, inviting people to indicate their preferences regarding future webinars. When I last checked, a total of 57 'votes' had been received, with the following distribution: 28 for more webinars on ghosts and hauntings; 10 for more webinars on UFOs/UAPs; 8 for more webinars on cryptids; 11 expressing satisfaction with the 'current mix' of webinars. It should be noted that members of the Facebook group aren't all paid-up members of ASSAP. But if the results of this informal survey are representative, it appears that ASSAP members tend to be more interested in ghostly phenomena than in UFOs.

My advice to would be to ask wide-ranging questions

This may be true more widely among people with an interest in the paranormal. For example, commenting on a book of mine dealing with strange experiences on Britain's roads, a reviewer, writing under the name 'Fionnuala', noted that the only reason she'd given the book three stars rather than four was because she was "much more into things like ghosts and cryptids and strange entities than [she was] UFOs, and [that in my book] there was just a little too much UFOing going on".[6] However, the book cites many cases *without* an explicit UFO-theme. And, arguably, there may be much commonality between supposedly different types of phenomena, with many cryptids, strange entities and UFOs being apparitional manifestations, having an hallucinatory or only transiently physical nature, rather than being 'things' with an enduring physical existence. Certainly, it's not hard to find case reports featuring both cryptids and UFOs.[7]

For anyone trying to write objectively about reports of anomalous phenomena, it would probably be impossible to accommodate fully the likes and dislikes of reviewers such as Fionnuala. Imagine, for example, that I embarked on a book on 'The Mysteries of Wiltshire in the 20th Century'. For balance, if nothing more, I would feel obliged to refer to the Warminster case mentioned above. By the same token, if I were writing a book about anomalous phenomena in central Scotland in the 20th century, I wouldn't be able to do so, with any honesty, without mentioning the numerous UFO sightings reported in and around the Bonnybridge area, which seemed to be particularly frequent in the first half of the 1990s (see **FT335:40**).[8] Similarly, if I were writing about phenomena in the Stocksbridge area of South Yorkshire, I would feel impelled to mention Jane Hayes's story. Of course, if an author wanted to please readers who weren't keen on UFO reports, he or she could omit Jane Hayes's story, or relate it without mentioning the farmers' testimony and the lights seen over a nearby reservoir. Arguably, though, such selectivity would undermine the objectivity of the person's reporting.

---

[1] Steve Dewey & Kevin Goodman, *History of a Mystery: Fifty Years of the Warminster Thing* (Swallowtail Books, 2015). Peter A McCue, Chapter 7, "The Warminster Phenomena", *Zones of Strangeness: An Examination of Paranormal and UFO Hot Spots* (AuthorHouse, 2012).

[2] James T Lacatski, Colm A Kelleher & George Knapp, *Skinwalkers at the Pentagon: An Insiders' Account of the Government's Secret UFO Program* (RTMA, LLC, 2021).

[3] Jenny Randles, *Supernatural Pennines* (Robert Hale, 2002, pp.192-3).

[4] Peter A McCue, "Recurrent spontaneous phenomena and UFO sightings: A case report", *Paranormal Review*, Issue 28, SPR, Oct 2003, pp. 6-12.

[5] ASSAP webinars, www.youtube.com/channel/UC_-Be960UF5JeZyKOy93PNg

[6] www.goodreads.com/book/show/39984346-paranormal-encounters-on-britain-s-roads

[7] See, for example, Stan Gordon's book *Silent Invasion: The Pennsylvania UFO-Bigfoot Casebook* (ed. Roger Marsh, privately published, 2010).

[8] Peter A McCue, Chapter 12, "The Bonnybridge UFO Phenomena", *Zones of Strangeness: An Examination of Paranormal and UFO Hot Spots* (AuthorHouse, 2012).

DR PETER McCUE is a retired clinical psychologist with a longstanding interest in anomalous phenomena and has written numerous articles for *Fortean Times*.

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

ForteanTimes

For anyone with a sense of adventure, an enquiring mind and a love of the weird and wonderful...

Every month, ForteanTimes takes you on an incredible journey into the unknown where you'll encounter some of the most fantastic phenomena on Earth... and sometimes beyond.

ForteanTimes
FLIGHT OF FANTASY?
IN SEARCH OF THE LIRPA LOOF
THE GENUINE GHOSTBUSTER
MONOLITHOMANIA!
DOCTOR ZHIVAGOAT
THE 'GOAT GLAND' QUACK & HIS TEXAS TESTICLE TRANSPLANTS
PLUS: TRUE TALES OF MAD TOTALITARIAN SCIENCE...
QUANTUM NAZIS!
PUTIN'S POTATOES!
COMMUNIST CORPUSCLES!
IN SEARCH OF THE HACKNEY MOLE MAN
HAUNTED SKIES!
RAF JET PILOTS REVEAL THE 1950s UFO ENCOUNTERS THE ESTABLISHMENT COVERED UP
SPIRITS OF SUTTON HOO
DISTANT VOICES, OTHER LIVES

CHOOSE YOUR FORTEAN TIMES PRINT SUBSCRIPTION... THEN CHOOSE YOUR FREE GIFT!

6 MONTHS - GET A FREE ISSUE

OR

12 MONTHS - GET A FREE DINOSAUR MUG

For tea nTimes

GREAT REASONS TO SUBSCRIBE

- A free issue of Fortean Times with a 6-month subscription*
- Free Dinosaur mug on a 1-year subscription*
- Free delivery of every issue
- Save on the cover price
- Every issue delivered before its available to buy in shops

ORDER TODAY!

QUOTING THE OFFER CODE **FT446P**

shop.forteantimes.com/ft446p

hello@metropolis.co.uk

020 8752 8195

* The offers are applicable to either a 6-month print subscription with direct debit payment or a 1-year print subscription payable by credit card/debit card or direct debit. If you wish to cancel the direct-debit offer, please contact us via phone or email. The offer is only valid for new UK customers, one per household, and while stocks last. Please allow 28 days for delivery of the gift.

REVIEWS / BOOKS

TO SEND REVIEW COPIES, CONTACT THE BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR AT DVBARRETT@FORTEANTIMES.COM

Standing in a metaphysical doorway

Psychologist and philosopher William James was more of a fortean than we realise, says **Eric Hoffman**, sceptical about both the paranormal and establishment science's dismissal of it

Mind Dust and White Crows

The Psychical Research of William James

ed. Gregory Shushan

White Crow Books 2024
Pb, 354pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781786772046

William James, MD

Philosopher, Psychologist, Physician

Emma K Sutton

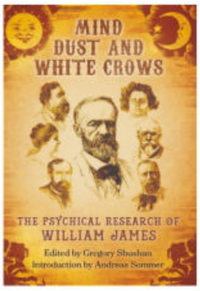
University of Chicago Press 2023
Pb, 261pp, £24, ISBN 9780223858985

Throughout his career, the psychologist and philosopher William James demonstrated a fortean-like distrust of scientific fundamentalism. He was frustrated by scientists' claims of irrefutable objectivity, which, doctrinally speaking, requires its own ironic surrender of scientific rigour. James was also outspoken in his criticism of Social Darwinism and medical materialism, favouring a more holistic and totalistic view of human psychology, open to anomalous phenomena.

James's interest in paranormal phenomena dates to 1885, when, soon after his infant son's death, he learned of the medium Leonara Piper's alleged ability to communicate with the dead. James took part in her séances and wrote obsessively about Piper for the better part of a decade; she was James's self-described "white crow", intended to upset the scientific establishment's view of parapsychology as pseudoscience; the term derived from James's claim that "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black… it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white."

The importance of James's parallel career as a paranormal researcher – he was associated with both the British and American Societies for Psychical Research – is evidenced by two new books: *Mind Dust and White Crows*, Gregory Shushan's meticulously edited selection of James's copious writings on paranormal subjects, and *William James, MD*, Emma K Sutton's brief yet lucid study of James's medical career.

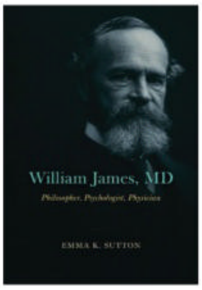
According to Sutton, James's research significantly informs his better-known, most scientifically rigorous works. James suspected that mystical religious belief and trance states were of medicinal value; this became the thesis of his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), in which rigorous scientific methods are applied to the study of religious and mystical thought. Even as a young medical student, Sutton observes, James sought scientific, rational explanations for, and therapeutic applications from, the seemingly inexplicable, noting in particular his interest in mesmerism as a legitimate physiological and psychological state.


MIND DUST AND WHITE CROWS
THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCH OF WILLIAM JAMES
Edited by Gregory Shushan
Introduction by Andreas Sommer

Sutton also points to the not infrequent oscillation between the curative and supernatural elements among Spiritualist circles, wherein mediums were just as often consulted for medical advice as they were to communicate with dead relatives; James himself consulted with Dr Phinias, one of Piper's spirit contacts. Sutton also helpfully discusses James's later experimentation with the "mind cure" method associated with Christian Science and the New Thought movement.

> *James suspected that mystical religious belief and trance states were of medicinal value*

Where James used to view these "wonder mongers" as a "sort of intellectual vermin", he came to believe "that type of mind takes hold of a range of truths to which the other kind [the scientific mind] is blind". He eventually came to occupy a kind of *ur-excluded middle*; paranormal true believers considered him a debunker, while scientists viewed him as credulous. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in his abiding interest in SPR associate FWH Myers's theory of the "subliminal consciousness", accessible through various mystical states such as telepathy, clairvoyance, hypnosis or trance. Myers believed that this consciousness had "cosmic" properties that provided proof of the survival of consciousness after bodily death. James was sceptical; unlike Myers, he could not so easily distinguish between the mind's activity and its response. Myers's complementary theory of consciousness as a cosmic "reservoir" nevertheless continued to trouble and fascinate James. In essays and letters – Shushan includes several of the most incisive – James continued to advocate for this "pan-psychic view of the Universe" wherein the human mind becomes a receptacle for a supraliminal consciousness, an "aggregation of the primordial mind dust". For James, the hallmark of mystical experience was an influx of energy that emanated from this subliminal consciousness. These same energies, Sutton notes, initially described by Myers as "recuperative", further reinforced James's speculations about the curative relationship between religious belief and the human psyche.



James's involvement in psychical research came to a close in 1909 and his "last word" on the subject was his essay "The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher'", also included in Shushan's selection, wherein James outlines conclusions drawn over his decade's worth of research into psychic phenomena. Despite a tendency towards "pure bosh", James still found "something" in the paranormal, though he remained agnostic as to exactly what that "something" is, beyond a potential "interaction between slumbering faculties" and a "cosmic environment of other consciousness". He could never commit himself to a belief in the supernatural, yet neither could he completely reject it. Though he mounted a rigorous defence of psychic phenomena, he nevertheless remained just as sceptical about its contents as he was distrustful of its dismissal by establishment science. James, forever fixed in this liminal state of between-ness, stood in a metaphysical doorway that was both entrance and exit.

Shushan's and Sutton's books are welcome re-assessments of the importance of the paranormal to James, one of the world's most esteemed post-Enlightenment thinkers.

Shushan ★★★★
Sutton ★★★★

A very British Beast

Despite a few quirks, **Richard C McNeff** enjoys a must-have for Crowley fiends

Aleister Crowley

The Beast in Britain

Gary Lachman & Michelle Merlin

Herb Lester Associates 2023

Folder & map, £12, ISBN 9781739897178

Aleister Crowley's extravagantly nomadic life is a gift for mapmaker and psychogeographer alike. Continuing in the tradition of Phil Baker's outstanding *City of the Beast*, which investigates Crowley's London haunts and is cited as a reference, Gary Lachman provides an attractively produced and packaged map of Crowley's Britain. Featuring such beastly watering holes as the Café Royal and the Fitzroy Tavern, the London section reveals the Streatham address where Crowley discovered masturbation and the square in Mayfair where he celebrated his last erection. A separate timeline lists 1941 as the dread year of dysfunction. Surprisingly, this gives Crowley's death as 2 December 1947 when all other sources record his passing as the first of the month.

ALEISTER CROWLEY
THE BEAST IN BRITAIN

Lachman charts the Beast's lairs from his Leamington Spa birthplace to the cemetery in Brighton where he was cremated. Illuminated by an accompanying commentary, the map features Boleskine House that haunts the shores of Loch Ness, Beachy Head, a favourite climbing spot, and Netherwood, the bohemian Hastings boarding house where Crowley spent his final years, now regrettably replaced by a close of new-build houses.

Other landmarks include Ashdown Forest where Crowley "is said to have performed rituals with Winston Churchill in order to fend off the Nazis". This refers to the legendary Operation Mistletoe of 1940, with the Beast's collaborator more usually identified as Ian Fleming wearing his Naval Intelligence hat, though as Lachman concedes: "Sadly, this remarkable act of patriotism remains uncorroborated."

In writing of the Battle of Blythe Road, the Hammersmith temple of the Golden Dawn that a "masked and daggered" Crowley tried unsuccessfully to repossess in a magical duel with Yeats in 1900, Lachman writes: "Yeats – whom he considered a 'quite unspeakable person' – refused Crowley a desired initiation." Who is "unspeakable"? Yeats? In fact, it was "weary Willie … that lank, dishevelled demonologist", as Crowley called him, who described the Beast as "an unspeakable mad person".

Nitpicking aside, there is a lot of appeal in this impressive project, making it a must-have for Crowley fiends. Now that Baker and Lachman have opened the geographical floodgates, a Crowley world atlas is clearly called for.

This would chart his exuberant presence in Paris, Berlin, Mexico, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the United States; map his walks across China and Spain and the mountains he scaled in the Himalayas, and highlight such potential tourist shrines as the ruin that was formerly the Abbey of Thelema in Sicily and the Cairo apartment where Crowley received *The Book of the Law*.

ALEISTER CROWLEY

"Aleister Crowley, National Treasure?" asks Lachman. Not yet, but maybe he's getting there.

★★★

Collection of Marvellous Things

Gaius Julius Solinus, tr. Arwen Elizabeth Apps

Eglantyne Books 2023

Pb, 300pp, £19.95, ISBN 9781913378066

An oddly produced book, lacking author information, formal bibliography, and (deplorably) index, this is actually a revised (via 280 informative end-notes) 2011 doctoral thesis by Arwen Elizabeth Apps at McQuarrie University (Sydney). Both translation and Latin text are online.

COLLECTION OF MARVELLOUS THINGS
GAIUS JULIUS SOLINUS

Its only predecessor is the English one by Arthur Golding (1587), marred by mistranslations (pardonable, given the Latin's frequent obscurity) and extensive bowdlerisation.

For many centuries, Solinus's book was wildly popular. Then it fell into sudden desuetude. Most people, including classicists, remember only one thing about the author: he gave us the word "Mediterranean".

We know nothing about him. He is variously dated to the mid-third or fourth century AD. Solinus is an exceedingly rare name; some think it derived from Sol (Sun). He is presumably Roman, albeit calling both Latin and Greek "Our Language".

He would not thank Apps for her title, one he forswore in his second prefatory letter, adopting the snappier and vainer *Polyhistor* (Polymath).

Solinus is frequently accused of cribbing most of his information from the Elder Pliny. Indeed, in the Renaissance, he was dubbed "Pliny's Ape".

This is absurd. He actually names 68 sources, right back to the Græco-Persian Ctesias (5th century BC), most often citing the Roman polymath Varro (1st century BC).

Unlike most ancient collections of "fortean" material, Solinus combines serious, if not always accurate, geographical and historical information about the world as the Romans knew it, ranging as far afield as China, India and Sri Lanka (which they called Taprobane), infiltrating this sober material with the curious and highly entertaining *Mirabilia*.

Not surprisingly, his tour of the known world begins with Rome, where the emperor Augustus is eulogised. Curiosities here include a copy of the *Iliad* written on a nut, Pomponius who never burped, Antonia who never spat, and the much-wounded soldier Marcus Sergius, who replaced a severed hand with an iron one.

Also, much nonsense about women (equally manifest in Pliny), including the claim that they should never sneeze after sex, lest this prevent sperm reaching the womb.

Many readers may gravitate to the British and Irish section (ch22). The "uncouth" Irish drink slain warriors' blood. The island lacks all fauna, including bees. The king of one of the surrounding islands has no personal woman, borrowing one when needed. Inhabitants of the Orkneys remain unmarried, sharing women in common (likewise many other races).

Solinus expresses particular interest in dogs (some roar louder than lions), elephants (famous for compassion, supposedly living 300 years) and horses (when their driver fell from his chariot at the Roman games, his steeds independently raced to the finishing line and demanded first prize).

Apps's translation and extensive end-notes, brimming with erudition and bibliographical enrichment, should give Solinus and his delightful mix of facts and fantasies a much-deserved new lease on life.

Barry Baldwin

★★★★★

Monsters, Aliens and Holes in the Ground

A Guide to Tabletop Roleplaying Games from D&D to Mothership

Stu Horvath

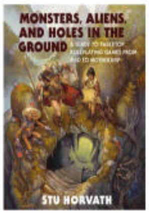
MIT Press 2023

Hb, 456pp, £45, ISBN 9780262048224

As Stu Horvath, author of this massive tome and co-presenter of the excellent *Vintage RPG* podcast notes, the state of the Role Playing Game (RPG) community at any given time is largely governed by the health of its most famous representative, *Dungeons & Dragons* (which, like Hoover or Walkman, became almost synonymous with the form). And D&D, which celebrates its 50th birthday

next year, is currently on a roll: its slick, streamlined fifth edition, itself 10 years old, has been phenomenally successful, aided by a supporting role in TV smash *Stranger Things*, numerous popular podcasts and cable spinoffs and a surprisingly decent film.

And when D&D blooms, everybody wins: from the middle-sized businesses like Chaosium, home to *Call of Cthulhu* and *Runequest*, both of which are almost as old as D&D, to a vast ecosystem of inventive tiny indies that have sprung up in its monstrous shadow, many taking the shape of elegantly designed zines, like the space-horror RPG *Mothership* mentioned in this book's subtitle. In this recent efflorescence the RPG world has benefited greatly from the turn away from screens for many gamers, the growth of online play formats (particularly during the pandemic), open-source DTP software, cheap digital publishing and printing services and online fundraising platforms like Kickstarter, which help developers launch projects to dedicated audiences.



Yet, half a century later, it can still be hard for non-players to understand the appeal of the format, which usually involves a small group of people sitting around a table with stacks of books, dice, pencils and scraps of paper (no snacks on my table please!). It's certainly not for everyone, but entering the "theatre of the mind" – the shared, imaginal space in which games take place – can be deeply transportative, even transformative akin to a séance, a group magical ritual or a shared psychedelic trip. It's no wonder that so many occultists, and no doubt many *FT* readers, are also avid players.

And this book is firmly for us. While not intended to be comprehensive (it would be many times its size) its 200+ chronological entries, all illustrated with photographs from Horvath's own collection, chart the evolution of the form, taking in the great (D&D in multiple iterations), the weird (*Dallas: The Television Role Playing Game*) and the simply uncategorisable (*World Action and Adventure*) titles that emerged along the way. Each entry is detailed, erudite and entertaining on its own but, read successively, they chart the flows of ideas, fads, themes and experiments found within RPG history's many hundreds of thousands of pages.

Clearly a labour of love, like so many of the games he describes, Horvath's overflowing enthusiasm for the form is deeply infectious: but be warned, entering this paper world of wonders will most likely land a critical hit on your bank balance, and dangerously encumber your bookshelves.

Mark Pilkington

★★★★★

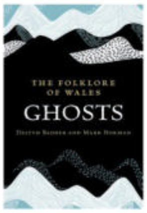
The Folklore of Wales: Ghosts

Delyth Badder & Mark Norman

University of Wales Press 2023

Hb, 240pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781915279507

There are hundreds of books about Welsh folklore. They range from popular accounts of famous Welsh legends and ghost stories – often geared towards tourists visiting the country – all the way through to academic tomes housed in university libraries. For the most part these books are quite similar, often repeating the same stories – derived from the accounts of antiquarians and early collectors of folklore – predominantly relying on sources written in English.



Dr Delyth Badder – a folklorist and consultant perinatal pathologist – and author Mark Norman – presenter of the popular *Folklore Podcast* – buck this trend by delving into the rich corpus of Welsh-language folklore materials to reveal subtle nuances of Welsh lore and tradition surrounding ghosts.

One of the most interesting features of this volume is the inclusion of the original Welsh-language texts alongside new English translations, simultaneously preserving the primary sources while opening them up to new readers and greater appreciation.

The chapters are organised according to familiar themes, with collections of lore relating to ghosts with unfinished business, poltergeist-like accounts and spectral sightings of the *Ladi Wen* (White Lady). There are also chapters on ghosts in the landscape, "holy ghosts" and a chapter dedicated to water spirits.

Of particular interest to this reviewer is the chapter titled "Fantastical Ghouls", which considers a range of what might be termed "high strangeness" entity encounters, including with a "nude being with eyes burning like fire", bog-dwelling witches and giants. As the authors note, "The line between *ysbrydion* (ghosts) and *ysbrydoedd* (spirits) in Welsh ghost-lore is tenuous, with angels, demons, fairies and 'ghosts' proper often being lumped together."

The book is further enhanced with evocative illustrations by Katie Marland. It features a very useful glossary of Welsh terms for various apparitions and supernatural beings, and contains an extensive bibliography of Welsh and English-language folklore texts.

Books like this are an important part of the process of "decolonising" the study of folklore – as well as psychical and fortean research more broadly – allowing for local voices to reclaim important aspects of intangible cultural heritage and to talk about them in their own idiom.

The Folklore of Wales: Ghosts is heartily recommended. *Gwaith pwysig iawn!* (Very important work!).

Jack Hunter

★★★★★

A Year in the Country: Threshold Tales

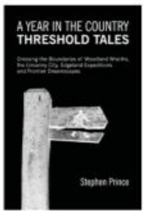
Stephen Prince

A Year In The Country 2023

Pb, 101pp, £7.95, ISBN 9781916940000

Threshold consciousness and liminal place are a frequent factor of much forteana but also feature in the gamut of fantastic fiction from fairytales to horror movies. Reading Stephen Prince's tantalising subtitle "Crossing the Boundaries of Woodland Wraiths, The Uncanny City, Edgeland Expeditions and Frontier Dreamscapes" and its synopsis of being "… an exploration of the edgelands, borderlands and liminal places in film; of the places whether literal, in the mind, cultural or amongst the paranormal realm where the boundaries between worlds, ways of life, the past and the future become thin and porous", I was curious to see which cinema would feature.

It's a thin volume of 12 chapters (reflecting the 12 months of the year), and Prince has been selectively diverse in his choices opting for the films *Without Name, Dark Tower, Columbus, The White Reindeer, The Watcher in the Woods* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes, Nadja* and *Vampir-Cuadecuc, The Shock of the Future, Hidden City* and *Glorious 39, Black Rainbow, No Surrender* and *Ghost Dog, Woodshock*, and *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*.



A number of these films are unfamiliar to me, but all are intriguing choices. Of those I know well, *The White Reindeer* and *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* are in some ways worlds apart, the former being a 1952 Finnish Shamanic fairytale and the latter a musical and reflective documentary road-trip through America's deep south, but both gothic-variant masterpieces are wreathed in an oneiric atmosphere.

Also of particular interest to me was the chapter on Disney's strangest diversions, *The Watcher in the Woods* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* – the latter an adaptation of Ray Bradbury's novel about a dark carnival descending upon a sleepy Illinois town. As a Bradbury fan since my early teens and having worked as a carny myself I appreciate the liminality of this tale of the travelling mysterious funfair.

Other themes discussed by Prince include electronic music, vampirism, architecture, rural and urban wyrd, mental decay and hauntology. So a lot of variation packed between slim covers, but in some chapters I was left wanting a little more discussion as well as more chapters – but it is worth noting that *Threshold Tales* is not entirely a standalone work but a part of the 'A Year in the Country' body of work that includes other such volumes which together cover a greater range of media.

Andy Paciorek

★★★

Derided but never silenced

Jerome Clark looks at the ufological legacy of Donald Keyhoe, who did more than his share in shaping public opinion

Against the Odds

Major Donald E Keyhoe and His Battle to End UFO Secrecy

Linda Powell

Anomalist Books 2023
Pb, 475pp, £19.99, ISBN 9781949501322

Only a relative few, most of them historically-minded, ufologists, remember Donald Keyhoe, but his influence on the continuing controversy over UFOs remains, even if by now a distant echo.

Awareness of strange aerial phenomena does not depend on Keyhoe – persistent puzzling sightings have done that – but Keyhoe as much as anyone shaped public attitudes in the early days.

A towering figure in his time (the 1950s through the 1960s), Keyhoe is now the subject of Linda Powell's solid, deeply researched biography.

The aptly titled *Against the Odds* takes up Keyhoe's life from the beginning in small-town Iowa and follows him into the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, his 1927 cross-country air trip as aide to aviation mega-celebrity Charles Lindbergh, his writing career as contributor to mainstream magazines and pulps such as *Weird Tales*, and his 1940s assignment as a Pentagon war propagandist.

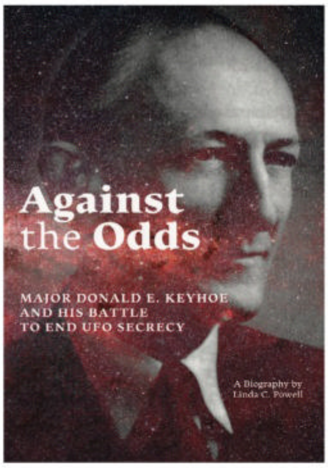
In 1943 he rose to the rank of Marine Corps major. From then till his death in 1988, he was known to his admirers as "Major Keyhoe".

Asked to write the definitive article on a then-novel matter, Keyhoe produced the blockbuster "The Flying Saucers Are Real" for the January 1950 issue of the mass-circulation men's magazine *True*. He agreed to the assignment reluctantly, according to Powell, having some sense of the trouble that might ensue.

He was right. *Against the Odds* can be read as an object lesson in the dangers of public identification with a heretical opinion.

Keyhoe, however, was stubborn by nature. He stood defiant against years of derision and opprobrium as he resisted critics – among them Project Blue Book, civilian debunkers and elite media – that sought to ridicule UFO proponents like him, or *especially* him, into shamed silence. If anyone doubts that ridicule is a synonym for "shut up," that person is encouraged to read this book.

Growing up as a junior ufologist in rural Minnesota, I knew who Keyhoe was – I read all four of his UFO books issued between 1950 and 1960 – but the events this book recounts were only faintly visible from where I (and just about everyone else) stood.


Against the Odds
MAJOR DONALD E. KEYHOE AND HIS BATTLE TO END UFO SECRECY
A Biography by Linda C. Powell

In 1957 Keyhoe became head of an ambitious, newly formed organisation, the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), which I joined in 1960 with my newspaper boy's earnings.

NICAP mounted an assault on the Air Force, accusing it of practising both incompetence and secrecy, and assembled as many respectable names (primarily high-ranking retired military officers, but also scientists, engineers, media personalities and clergy) as were willing to link their reputations with UFO advocacy.

NICAP survived under Keyhoe until 1969, when he was fired after accumulating a litany of internal grievances about his managerial and fund-raising deficiencies, sometimes authoritarian manner and more. It is not a pretty story; actually, it's quite a sad one. Powell's treatment exposes an abundance of reasons why things went so wrong. There is no question of Keyhoe's sincerity; there is plenty of evidence, though, that he lacked the skills for the job.

On the other hand, maybe some of the same problems would have brought down even a more capable leader.

One of them was fierce opposition by those in power to any notion that the noble Air Force, which in fact conducted little real investigation while indulging in much self-serving polemic, did not have the situation well in hand. Prominent persons questioned Keyhoe's patriotism simply because he criticised the Air Force, period. Today, practically nobody defends the Air Force and Blue Book's wretchedly ill-conceived handling of the phenomenon.

In these pages, UFO sightings as such hover only in the background. Powell focuses on the societal, political and personal side of the disputes that raged, sometimes within ufology itself, over matters both profound and petty.

Though I am well versed in the history of the UFO wars, hardly a page of *Against the Odds* fails to inform me of something I didn't know. I am sure I will not be alone in that.

One closes Powell's splendid biography, which is sympathetic but hardly hagiographic, with the impression of an ordinary man who placed himself in extraordinary circumstances.

Decades later, as physicists, journalists, historians, academics, pilots and politicians – precisely the figures whom Keyhoe attempted with limited success to recruit into the ranks – descend on a subject barrelling toward respectability, one wishes he were here to see what he started.

★★★★★

Flying Saucers from Naziland

The Real Story of the Nazi UFOs Volume 1

Maurizio Verga

Independently published 2023
Hb, 316pp, £30, ISBN 9798861606165

Maurizio Verga comprehensively shows how the belief in secret Nazi flying saucer technology came about and how it has evolved over time.

FLYING SAUCERS FROM NAZILAND
THE REAL STORY OF THE NAZI UFOS

Some background factors were memories of the WWII foo fighter sightings, and the post-war ghost rockets seen over Scandinavia and Europe. The latter inspired thoughts that captured German scientists were collaborating with the Soviets to test advanced V2 rockets. By the 1950s, when flying saucers were all the rage, the Western press often carried rumours about Soviet super weapons based on WWII-era German designs.

It came to be accepted that the brilliance of Nazi scientists had created all manner of technological marvels and that they secretly brought them to fruition in the USSR and the USA.

As with other conspiracy theories, there is no evidence. "As a rule of thumb, nearly all authors dealing with the German and then Nazi UFO stories copied summarised information from other unreliable press sources and began to quote each other. Cross-quoting made unsubstantiated claims more believable, while the older press sources grew in reliability proportionally with their age. In the eyes of many, the older, the more reliable."

Kenneth Arnold did not see saucer-shaped craft. To compound the error, many of these Nazi craft have turned into spacecraft (Haunebu II for instance) to fit with the ETH and have been modelled on the infamous UFOs photographed by contactees George Adamski and Billy Meier. Nonetheless such revelations are unlikely to stop Nazi UFO beliefs that support dubious ideologies.

This is an excellent look at the major influences on the Nazi UFO mythos, with a useful bibliography and index.

Nigel Watson

★★★★★

FORTEAN FICTION: MAGICAL WAR

SYD MOORE, AUTHOR OF THE ESSEX WITCH MUSEUM MYSTERIES, ON THE INSPIRATION BEHIND HER NEW NOVEL

For her latest novel, *The Grand Illusion*, Syd Moore drew on the occult history of World War II and tales of witches waging a magical battle with Nazi Germany. Here, she tells how she found inspiration in Boscastle's Museum of Witchcraft and Magic...

THE MUSEUM of WITCHCRAFT

I stumbled upon a reference to the 'Cone of Power' ritual, that allegedly took place in 1940, when I was researching another book, *Strange Magic*. On the hunt for the bones of Ursula Kempe, executed for witchcraft in St Osyth, Essex, in 1582, I found myself at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle, Cornwall interviewing the assistant curator, Joyce Froome, about the museum's founder, Cecil Williamson, and the part he played in Ursula's story.

Before we met, I browsed the museum's wonderfully eclectic collection. An exhibit that caught my eye was a photograph of a porcelain figure of Adolf Hitler, a pincushion embedded in his posterior. Beneath it was a short description of a strange war time activity. Entitled 'A Cone of Power Against Invasion' it described how Gerald Gardner and his coven took part in an anti-invasion ritual in 1940 [see **FT267:34-41**]. I chatted about this to Joyce and went on to mention it briefly in my novel, *Strange Magic*, not giving it any more consideration, as the wartime period was outside the timeline for my series.

But the story refused to leave me alone. It was always there at the back of my mind, like a recurring itch. During lockdown, with many comparisons being made to WWII, it popped up. So, I gave in to its call and started researching in earnest.

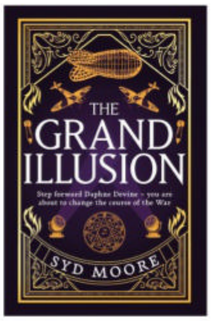
Spring 1940 was marked by a national unease. Although the evacuation of Dunkirk had been a success in terms of morale and saving the men who were brought back home, we had left ammunition and guns on the beaches of France to be commandeered by the enemy. People suspected that the Germans would carry on their invasion of Europe and seek next to land on British shores, especially after Churchill's 'We Shall fight on the Beaches' speech on 4 of June.

In 1939 the Security Service, later MI5, comprised just 36 officers charged with defence of the realm. After Churchill took over from Chamberlain in May, it began to recruit rapidly. And broadly.

Jasper Maskelyne, a stage magician, volunteered for the war effort and was sent for training to Farnham Castle. Situated in the small market town, the castle was not only the residence of the Bishops of Winchester, but from 1940 to 1944 became the home of the Camouflage Training and Development Centre of the Royal Engineers. In its ranks, along with Maskelyne, were some of the strangest recruits the military had ever seen: artists, a West End theatre designer, a circus manager, an art critic, a magazine editor, designers, sculptors, cartoonists, artisans and a surrealist poet.

With the threat of imminent invasion, any idea to repel the enemy was considered. Many of the German High Command were interested in occult ideas, something considered by the Brits to be a potential weakness. Goebbels and Hess were fascinated by Nostradamus's prophecies and astrology, Goering was a proponent of World Ice Theory, Himmler was occupied with Luciferianism, and Hitler was interested in 'Death Rays'. It is not a stretch to imagine a 'Cone of Power' operation might be put to good use in terms of what would now be called a psy-op, its purpose to send waves of anxiety through the enemy leaders disposed to magical thinking.

Gerald Gardner, commonly thought of as the father of Wicca, wrote in his book *Witchcraft Today*: "Witches did cast spells to stop Hitler landing after France fell… they met, raised the great cone of power and directed the thought at Hitler's brain: 'You cannot cross the sea'." He added: "I am not saying that they stopped Hitler... All I say is that I saw a very interesting ceremony performed with the intention of putting a certain idea into his mind."


THE
GRAND
ILLUSION
Step forward Daphne Devine - you are about to change the course of the War
SYD MOORE

In *Cecil Williamson's Book of Witchcraft*, Steve Patterson states that Williamson also claimed to be involved in the ritual, "in the Ashdown Forest in Sussex known as 'Operation Mistletoe', organised as a military operation to magically avert the Germans from launching a full scale invasion of Britain." And which involved "a detachment of Canadian soldiers, Aleister Crowley's son and an assortment of mystics and fortune tellers."

The addition of Crowley's son could well have originated with Amado Crowley himself, who many forteans will be aware of [see **FT414:30-37**]. For those who aren't, he claimed to be the infamous occultist's son, and suggested Gardner's account was a fiction inspired by his father's working in 1941. The eminent historian Ronald Hutton and Gardner's biographer Philip Heselton have both dismissed this.

Heselton's book *In Search of the New Forest Coven* was indispensable when I visited the area, helping me work out where the ritual may have been conducted. What I also discovered, through knocking on doors and roaming the woods, provided me with plenty more anecdotal and circumstantial evidence. One householder detailed his grandfather's tales of witches going into the wood. I also encountered Haydn Bridgeman, a ranger who, once I had recounted both versions of the ritual, directed me to a memorial to the Canadian Airmen, mere metres from the area that Heselton mentions. Gareth Owen, Archæologist at the New Forest National Park Authority, supplied me with links to mapping sites and war diaries enabling me to confirm the presence of an airfield nearby.

On balance, I think it probable that the ritual did take place, with enough deniable plausibility built in to refute it if necessary. What was it like? Well, if you want an idea I can recommend a rather good novel based on the tale…

Syd Moore is currently Essex Libraries' first Author in Residence. Twice shortlisted for a CWA Dagger for her short stories, she is the author of the Essex Witch Museum Mysteries, which was shortlisted for the Good Reader Holmes and Watson Award in 2018 and 2019.

The Grand Illusion is available from Oneworld, £16.99.

TO SEND REVIEW COPIES, CONTACT THE EDITOR AT DRSUTTON@FORTEANTIMES.COM

The kids are alright

The BFI serves up another perfect Saturday morning trip to the pictures with this latest collection of Children's Film Foundation gems ranging from the gritty to the groovy

Children's Film Foundation Bumper Box Vol 5

Dir various, UK 1947-1980
BFI, £29.99 (DVD)

"The Children's Film Foundation had a Middle Earth level of complexity!" laughs British Film Institute stalwart Vic Pratt, curator of this latest collection of vintage kids' flicks. "Everyone was working for minimum rates, so there was no real need to make a big profit. They could be a bit chancy and experimental, and that really paid off. You might come to these films in the hope of some nostalgia, but it's possible to get into them on their own merits. You don't even have to be a greying old fuddy-duddy like me…"

For this fifth BFI box set, Vic and his team have assembled a decidedly grimy and gritty selection. While Volume 4 (See **FT433:60**) was a giddy riot of dragons, timeslips and venerable British comedians trapped between the pixels of 1980s computer games, Volume 5 is rooted in an often downbeat world of crime, espionage and wartime derring-do. *The Secret Tunnel* (1947) kicks off proceedings at a gentle trot. The earliest film to have been included on any of these sets, it's a fascinating example of why – at least according to Vic – early CFF films often failed to connect with working class audiences. Besuited teenagers with cut glass accents? Priceless Rembrandts hidden in the cellars of rambling family mansions? It must have seemed incongruous amidst the rowdy, gun-toting Westerns of the ABC Minors cinema club.

> *Exposing school-age children to the avant garde was almost a civic duty*

The pace soon picks up, though. *Circus Friends* (1956) is a showcase for the nascent talents of future kitchen sink queen Carol White, excelling here as a no-nonsense circus teenager riding into battle with a tightwad local farmer. This charming caper was helmed by future *Carry On* supremos Peter Rogers and Gerald Thomas, and it's hard not to imagining a guffawing Sid James puffing on a woodbine round the back of the big top. Meanwhile, *The Piper's Tune* (1962) stars future big screen *Doctor Who* kiddie Roberta Tovey as the youngest of a hidden community of children fleeing across the Pyrenees from Napoleon's advancing armies. Beautifully filmed on location in Snowdonia, it boasts a stridently anti-war message.

By the time we reach *The Rescue Squad* (1963), we're firmly into the realms of Vic's beloved "chancy and experimental" era. Ostensibly the tale of a gaggle of kids attempting to retrieve their model aeroplane from the window of an abandoned tower, it crackles with surreal energy. The tower itself, cobwebbed and darkly silhouetted, feels like an intrusion from some weird, gothic potboiler. And repeated cutaways to one hapless youngster, wandering aimlessly with a tea-chest stuck permanently over his head, echo the quaint British dadaism of *The Running, Jumping And Standing Still Film*. This deliciously wonky ambience continues into *Daylight Robbery* (1964), where a troupe of beatnik youngsters are trapped in a half-completed Brutalist tower block with a gang of grizzled, would-be bank robbers. Shot in crisp monochrome from frequently disorienting angles, it comes accompanied by an atonal modern jazz score by composer Tristram Cary, epitomising an era when exposing school-age children to a healthy dose of the avant-garde was seen almost as a matter of civic duty.

And if *All At Sea* (1969) is an atypically lavish romp across continental Europe, then *The Hostages* (1975) is 1970s CFF at its claustrophobic finest. It also gives the irrepressible Robin Askwith the opportunity to show off a rarely-seen facet of his talents. Playing the psychopathic Terry, one of a brace of escaped convicts holding a trio of children hostage in their remote farmhouse, he puts in a compellingly disturbing performance. "Did the horrible man smash Mummy's pretty things?" he sneers, demolishing the parental bedroom while keeping one hand clamped firmly around the throat of the youngest daughter. Bleak, brilliant and genuinely tense, it's the undoubted highlight of the set: a film that feels like an unfairly sidelined cousin to *The Sweeney* or even *Get Carter*.

A starring role for the teenage Keith Chegwin in *Robin Hood Junior* (1975) inevitably lightens the mood, but it's less of a cheery romp than you might imagine, and has elements of the bitter, anti-authoritarian message of much-loved 1980s TV staple *Robin Of Sherwood*. And rounding off proceedings is *The Boy Who Never Was* (1980), a gutsy tale in which typical 'Gor Blimey' CFF kids attempt to foil the assassination of a visiting African president. Its opening scene – the effective demonstration of a car bomb amid the rusting pipes of an industrial wasteland – emphasises just how far the CFF had come in the 33 years since that jolly spiffing Rembrandt in the cellar was spirited away through a hidden passage by dashed unsporting cads and bounders.

Bundled together with a selection of vintage shorts (including the groovy "psychodrastic" decorating of 1970s tearaways *The Chiffy Kids*) it's a collection that, once again, showcases the sheer range of The CFF. For almost 40 years, this quietly subversive institution acted almost as a parallel universe British film industry, its features shown fleetingly then abandoned to languish for decades in dusty vaults. And those "merits" that Vic mentions? Charm, audacity and a sense of intoxicating weirdness that rarely fails to simmer to the surface. Long may these lovingly compiled box sets continue to shine a light on this unjustly neglected cinematic treasure trove.

Bob Fischer

★★★★★

Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga

Dir George Miller, Aus/US 2024. On general release

It has been 45 years since George Miller introduced us to the grimy, lawless world of *Mad Max*, and what essentially started as Ozploitation in 1979 has, after 2015's superb *Mad Max: Fury Road*, cemented itself as one of the best action franchises in film history.

With a *Fury Road* sequel titled *Mad Max: The Wasteland* currently in the works, the exploits of antihero Max Rockatansky are set to continue, but while we wait for that, Miller has been kind enough to grace us with *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*, a prequel to *Fury Road* detailing how Furiosa became the character we know.

Spanning 15 years, the film sees Alyla Browne star as the eponymous heroine during her childhood before Anya Taylor-Joy takes over to bridge the gap leading to Charlize Theron's sublime 2015 performance.

Being a true odyssey, the story shows the hardships Furiosa endures from when she is taken from her home and kept by the unhinged warlord Dementus (Chris Hemsworth) to how she comes to be in the employ of the tyrant Immortan Joe (Lachy Hulme), showcasing how her warrior spirit never wavers in spite of it all, the fire of vengeance burning strong within her throughout.

Where *Fury Road* was essentially a two-hour chase, *Furiosa* covers a far longer time period over 148 minutes, which naturally entails a significant shift in how the film is structured. This may alienate viewers expecting more of the same, but the runtime is ultimately earned thanks to the grandeur of the story, and the difference in pacing, tone and narrative structure serve to make *Furiosa* a complementary contrast to *Fury Road*. The expanded runtime also means that the there is more time for world-building, and *Furiosa* expands on the geography, politics, and lore of the *Mad Max* universe in a satisfyingly nuanced manner.

Never the wordiest of filmmakers, Miller once again highlights his preference for showing over telling. This is reflected most in the action, where dialogue is particularly sparse and the action is exquisite. The changes in perspective and cinematography from *Fury Road* makes the action and violence in *Furiosa* feel crueller and more confrontational.

In terms of the performances, while Taylor-Joy's résumé speaks for itself, Theron's performance as *Furiosa* was so iconic that some expressed concern about another actress taking over the role to portray a younger version of the character, but Taylor-Joy competently embodies a Furiosa on the path to becoming who she needs to be, and it is also worth mentioning that Browne delivers an unusually compelling performance for such a youthful performer.

In terms of other returning characters, Lachy Hulme takes over the mantle of Immortan Joe with menacing skill, and it is enjoyable to see his rogues' gallery of memorable antagonistic associates return to be fleshed out further. As for Hemsworth, while his comedic quirks are on display and help garner some uneasy laughs, the character of Dementus is so thoroughly irredeemable that his behavioural oddities only make him that much more unsettling, leaving the audience yearning to witness what Furiosa has in store for him.

George Miller's world has evolved and expanded like few other film franchises, showing that the filmmaker still has plenty left to say, and while prequels are rarely necessary, this is such an epic tale about such an epic character that watching it on a huge screen with great sound certainly makes for a lovely experience.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★★

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

We should either blame or thank Bette Davis. Her performance as an unhinged, faded child star torturing her paraplegic sister in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* sent a signal to ageing female actresses. If they stop casting you as the wholesome young lead, you can find a new life as a demented, older psychopath. It even has a name: 'Hagsploitation' – a subgenre accused of demonising older women, though I'd argue it might also liberate them.

The early 1980s slasher boom went full hag, most famously when smiley girl next door Betsy Palmer turned into a grinning serial killer for *Friday the 13th*. But there were plenty more, like Susan Tyrell. With a string of stage and screen credits (plus an Oscar nomination) behind her, husky-voiced Tyrell was pushing the decrepit age of 40 when she was cast as crazy Aunt Cheryl in the low-budget, psycho-sexual romp *Butcher, Baker, Nightmare Maker*. Cheryl is overprotective of her orphaned nephew, whom she has cared for since his parents were killed in a car crash; we see this in the prologue, and it's pretty clear Aunt Cheryl cut the brake lines. When he announces he's moving away for a basketball scholarship, she starts killing locals in a bid to keep him home.

There's an incest angle that'll make you squirm, but it quickly gives way to an unexpected focus: homophobia. Seeing characters casually call gay people 'sick' and demand they resign from their jobs "for decency's sake" is just one of the shocking elements of this fascinating genre mash-up. Tyrell, though, makes the film lodge itself in the nightmare subconscious. And boy, does she go for it – stabbing and slashing, with crazy hair, crazier eyes and blood splashed over her bare chest. It's a creepy turn that some critics say is bad for women. I was just left with a dazzled appreciation for the power of 'older' actresses letting rip.

Stabbing and slashing, with crazy hair and crazier eyes

More left-field horror hits the shelves this month, with Frank Henenlotter's debut *Basket Case* (1982). It's another tale of unconventional family love, with Duane arriving in a sleazy hotel clutching a fistful of cash and a mysterious picnic basket. Inside is his deformed brother Belial – their quest: to destroy the doctors who separated them at birth.

Henenlotter has a knack for celebrating communities that are ignored by mainstream cinema. His setting of the film in Times Square during New York's most crime-ridden era is a brilliant choice. Sure, there are the usual gun shots, peep shows and plenty of blood, but he also brings humanity and warmth to 'death city'. This includes Belial himself. Other directors would have presented him as a grotesque rubber freak who MUST. BE. DESTROYED! He's undoubtedly freaky, but Henenlotter tells us that even basket cases deserve love, too. Belial certainly gets that in the sequel – in a brow-raising sex scene with his equally deformed girlfriend, Eve, which left some asking 'Why?' and others asking 'Why the hell not?'

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA
Fortean Times

ANYTIME, ANYWHERE READING

YOUR FAVOURITE MAGAZINE, NOW ALSO AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

HACKNEY MOLE MAN
AND OTHER STRANGE STORIES FROM THE NEW MILLENNIUM
FRAUDULENT FUNERAL • TOILET MAP • PECULIAR PLANTS • ANTIQU
THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA
ForteanTi
HAUNTED SKIES!
RAF JET PILOTS REVEAL THE 1950s UFO ENCOUNTERS THE ESTABLISHMENT COVERED UP
SPIRITS OF SUTTON HOO
PSYCHIC ARCHÆOLOGY'S FINEST HOUR
DISTANT VOICES, OTHER LIVES
THE WARTIME WORK OF A TRANCE MEDIUM

View, share and bookmark your issue

Access the latest issue and a full archive of past issues

Use keyword search to find specific articles across the archive

Download and access the content offline on mobile, tablet or your desktop

SUBSCRIBER BENEFITS:

- Convenient, on-the-go reading
- Get new issues before they hit the shelves
- Save on cover price and postage
- Enjoy a lower cost than print editions
- Instant access, guaranteed and delay free delivery, ideal for overseas customers

SCAN & SUBSCRIBE

Download on the App Store
GET IT ON Google Play

LETTERS

CONTACT US BY POST: PO BOX 1200, WHITSTABLE CT1 9RH, OR E-MAIL SIEVEKING@FORTEANTIMES.COM
PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH YOUR POSTAL ADDRESS

Helpful Synchronicity

On 20 December 2023, as I left our house [in Tennessee] at 3am to catch a long flight to Alaska to visit family, I stood outside waiting for my husband and noticed Jupiter very bright at the zenith of the perfectly clear sky. The planet was so bright I wondered if a person with excellent vision outside of the city might be able to see the moons, or even the stripes; this in turn brought to mind an FT letter a few years back in which the author had described an old lady who claimed to be able to see astronomical details beyond the ordinary: "[As a child] I could see everything. Everything." I distinctly remembered the writer quoting her. [This was Stephen Collier's letter, "Jupiter's Moons" in **FT390:69**, March 2020; I'd forgotten the author describing the lady as specifically being able to see *Jupiter's moons*!]

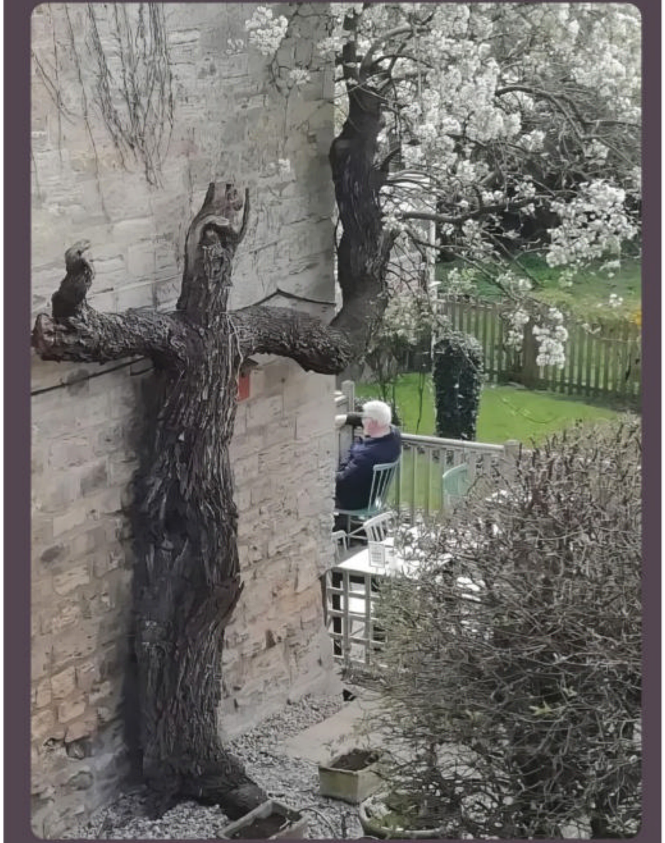
Continuing to look up at Jupiter, I thought of a book I'd re-read recently, *Hamlet's Mill*, by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, in which the authors describe a character in Persian mythology and his "seven-ringed cup". Since the authors emphasise the character's association with Jupiter, I'd wondered while reading if the ancient Persians could possibly have known that Jupiter is striped, and if so, could the "seven-ringed" cup have been a literal description of the disc of Jupiter? I made a mental note to look later for a good photo online of Jupiter so I could count the stripes. (Note: there appear to be more or less seven, but I'm not an astronomer.) Then, I tried my best to remember the name of the Persian character with the cup but could only recall that it began with the letter "J". At that point, my husband came outside, we got in the car, and I forgot all about Jupiter and Persian mythology.

Later that day, on the plane, I decided to pass the time by turning on my music app and listening to Enya, but instead of Enya, a song popped up all by itself as soon as I opened the app – a New Age number with a Middle Eastern sound I must have downloaded at some point and then forgotten: "Through the Veil," by Jamshied Sharifi. That was when I remembered that *Jamshyd* was the Persian mythological character whose name had slipped my mind at 3am.

I have no clue what this sequence of events means. Is there a helpful brownie or polt who ferrets out bits of obscure information just for me? Can my iPhone read my mind? Either way, how did AI or my friendly brownie manage to dig out a tune with the answer while I trudged through several airports? Perhaps the most rational explanation (assuming one accepts PK effects on electronics) is that I subconsciously remembered the name *Jamshyd*, subconsciously remembered the New Age tune by the musician of that name I'd downloaded several years ago, and even subconsciously remembered the exact subject of Mr Collier's FT letter, and that the PK activity came from me. I, however, prefer the brownie explanation.

Julia Morgan Scott
Chattanooga, Tennessee

SIMULACRA CORNER



Ian Jarvis sent this picture of a tree in Wetherby, West Yorkshire, suggesting it was "Groot from the Guardians of the Galaxy, heading over to his girlfriend's house with a nice big bunch of flowers."

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Scala stories

The article about the Scala cinema in King's Cross, London [**FT440:36-39**] brought back memories of long ago. I was a pupil at Sir Philip Magnus school, Penton Rise, just up the road from the Scala, in 1969. Back then, the King's Cross area was a seedy locale. The first day in school, as well as in the area, was for me a culture shock. I came to school via the 239, or 214, bus, getting on at the Bunhill Row Fields stop, near Moorgate. In comparison, living in Peabody Buildings, off Whitecross Street EC1, was salubrious. I wasn't particularly good at sports, and like some of my school pals, we bunked off football, either out the back gate, or over the fence.

One afternoon, my pal 'Frenchie' Goodwin, and another truant and me, decided to go and see the film *Shaft*. This was at the cinema, which later became the Scala. At school break-time, many boys gambled penny-up-the-wall; while the weaker boys got rolled in the toilets. Some of the gambling fraternity hit the machines in The Golden Goose amusement arcade, opposite King's Cross railway station. Of course, in and around that area were the local characters, as well as the 'ladies plying their trade', in Argyle Square. One unforgettable character was the elderly Jacobus van Dyn. He was tattooed head to foot, and trolled about in an overcoat sporting a small button-badge which stated 'Hyde Park Speakers Corner'. I first got to hear about him from another school pal, Paul Becker. But we knew him as Danny Jacob van Dyn. While drinking tea in one of the local greasy-spoon cafes, he would regale us with tales of being in America in the 1930s, and mixing with mobsters. Was it a load of bollocks? I don't know.

Ronnie Knight
Holland on Sea, Essex

Non-melting ice cream

The mysterious non-melting ice cream sighted by Maggie Ferrari in Rimini [**FT442:64**] may not be very mysterious. Several countries in the eastern Mediterranean have traditions of making ice cream thickened with additional ingredients such as mastic or powdered orchid root, which melts very slowly even in summer heat, such as Turkish *dondurma*, Greek *dudurmas*, or Syrian *booza*. It's quite possible some maker in Rimini was experimenting with such a product.

Philip Eagle
Woodford Green, Essex

Canine base jumping

In her article 'Overtoun House and Bridge' [**FT444:66-7**], Emilia Ukkonen refers to media reports of dogs leaping off Overtoun bridge in Scotland "for no apparent reason" and being killed or injured in their fall into the wooded gorge below. Author Paul Owens, who favours a paranormal explanation, states that many instances go unreported. He believes that there have probably been several hundred jumps over the years.[1]

While Ukkonen alludes to paranormal explanations of the dogs' behaviour, she fails to mention that Dr David Sands, an expert in canine psychology, has proposed credible prosaic explanations.[2]

Peter A McCue
East Dunbartonshire

NOTES

[1] 'Scotland's dog suicide bridge is the world's most baffling mystery because we KNOW it is still happening every year', https://www.scottishdailyexpress.co.uk/news/weird-news/scotlands-dog-suicide-bridge-worlds-27826374

[2] 'Dog Suicide Bridge Scotland "TV documentary"', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ysvn2JDzVw8 (NB: The opening commentary in the video describes the location as 'south-west Scotland'. However, the infamous bridge is in West Dunbartonshire, in west-central Scotland, and not far from Glasgow.)

ABOVE: Overtoun Bridge and House, Scotland's canine suicide hotspot.

Regarding the article on Overtoun House and its infamous 'dog suicide bridge': my wife and I visited the location a few years back when the news of the alleged dog suicides first appeared in the press. It is a pleasant, rather wild location, and to be fair the bridge is a fair height above the rocky course of the stream below it. From what we could see there was no obvious reason why dogs should want to jump off the bridge. The supernatural explanations involve the mention an archetypal 'White Lady of Overtoun' and another one involved the negativity produced by the tragic death of a baby thrown from the bridge in 1994 by its troubled father. A more rational explanation of sorts was eventually forthcoming, and it was suggested that it was either dogs detecting the smell of animals below the bridge, or the possibility that, in a sort of 'mermaid syndrome', given the wind speed and direction at any given time, the shape of the bridge was producing a specific low frequency sound only detectable by dogs and this is what lured them to their deaths. Yes, dogs do hurl themselves from the bridge, but as yet no testable explanation has been forthcoming. While we were there, several people walking their dogs passed over the bridge with no ill effects.

Brian Allan
Kincardine-on-Forth, Clackmannanshire

Haunted portrait

In the summer of 1972 my friends and I were on a school-organised fencing week at Bisham Abbey, on the Thames near Marlow. One friend and I were assigned to the "portacabin" away from the house; the other two, one of whom was notoriously jumpy, were up the stairs in a dormitory.

When I went to see how the dorm-dwellers had settled in, I had to pass a large portrait of an Elizabethan-looking lady in black and thought it would be amusing to tell my nervous friend that she came down from her painting at night and came up the stairs into the dormitory and through the disused doorway at the end. Not long after, for some undisclosed reason, I was told to move my stuff from the Portakabin into the dormitory, which I was keen to do as it was a fair old dark walk outside.

Once I had moved, our fencing professor visited and started telling us the story of the lady in the portrait… I told him we'd already done all that, but he was insistent that no workers would stay in the Abbey overnight. He told us she came down, turned negative, and came up the stairs, into the dormitory next to ours (which used to be all one room) and through the disused door! Only the fact that my friend was so much more nervous than I was (and I was happy to be top dog for a change) prevented me from going back to the Portakabin.

Needless to say, practically every fencer was up all night on the stairs waiting to see her, but she was a no-show. I have learned since that she was supposed to have killed her subnormal child in a fit of rage, but in 1972 I didn't read a paper and don't remember having seen it on the TV. Certainly no ghosts were discussed among us before we got to the dormitory. Perhaps it illustrates how ghost stories start, by people noticing details and spinning an (un)likely scenario?

Georgina Skipper
Wyke Regis, Dorset

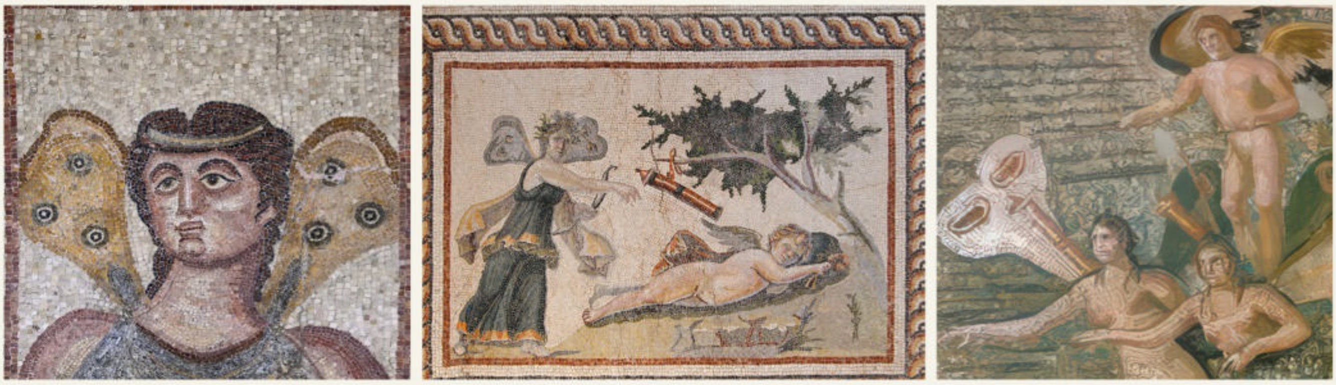
Memory cloud

I read Simon Young's article on past lives with interest [**FT434:30-35**]. Aside from being well written, it reminded me of my own experience. As a very young child, maybe aged two or three, I frequently recounted a past life memory to my parents. Some of the detail has been lost to me, nearly 60 years later, and I worry that my memory now is of recounting the memory then.

It is only a very short snippet of a past life, set, I always thought, but with no evidence, in Asia, maybe China (at school, children often said they thought I was Chinese although I have no such DNA). It was a dark, wet night. I was standing beside a wide river that was in full flow, perhaps even flooding. The water was turbulent and a muddy yellow colour. I was accompanied by an older man, maybe my father. I guess I was in my late teens or early twenties. We were both dressed in long cloaks made from rough cloth, possibly brown in colour, and hooded. I felt we were being pursued but, in any case, we had to cross the river and knew it was perilous. We got into a narrow wooden boat that was shaped a bit like a punt. We started out into the flow of the river but hadn't got far when the boat capsized. I recall how it felt to drown in the cold, murky water.

And that's it! Not much of a story I know, but it has haunted me all my life. I have a dread of water but, being rather an obstinate person, I try to swim as frequently as possible. My parents taught me to swim before I could walk by throwing me into the sea, much to the horror of passers-by, so my mother said. I had weekly classes until I was well into my teens and then swam for a club. After completing countless laps, I hate pools but am lucky to live by the sea and wild swim by preference.

Since reading the FT article, I have been pondering the nature of past life recollection. Like the author, I have serious doubts about how memory can survive death. I am a vivid dreamer. I frequently see the faces of people I don't recognise; I see designs for clothes I have no recollection of having seen previously, and I hear music I am sure I have not heard before (I have no musical ability and wish I was able to write these musical passages down). I also have very early memories, the earliest being on my first birthday, stabbing tinned pears whilst sitting in a highchair.



Fairy Wings

Simon Young's very enjoyable article on fairies [**FT441:38-45**] states that "the first winged fairies were only painted in the late 1700s."

As usual though, there is a classical antecedent. In the Hatay Archæology Museum in Antakya (ancient Antioch), Turkey, one can see mosaics of flying beings with butterfly wings. I remember being shocked to see these, having thought insect-winged fairies were a Victorian conceit.

Kora Drexler
Turner, Oregon

My mother confirmed this took place: I was a precocious child and insisted on doing everything for myself.

In a recent moment between sleep and waking, I had a thought, which I put to you as a half-baked notion rather than a coherent hypothesis. I hope readers will knock it into shape or kick it into touch. What if memory were more akin to cloud computing/storage than being internal, as we suppose? I have no problem understanding the Law of Conservation of Energy and like to apply this to the human spirit. This law states that energy can only be converted from one form to another, but not created or destroyed.

If the spirit is the energy of human life, death cannot destroy it. How, though, does it retain any memory? If we see the brain as the hardware upon which mind software runs, there seems to be no logical way in which the chemicals required for thought, emotion, and memory can be retained. However, if memory were somehow external to the body, lodged in a collective, maybe we would have to reassess our previous, institutionalised, assumptions.

I love to watch starling murmurations and marvel as the birds twist and turn across the darkening sky. How do they coordinate their dance? The same can be said for fish milling in a collective. How do birds know where to migrate to or turtles know to return to the sea? My very unscientific notion is that maybe there is an energy network that extends to infinity. We may all be able to connect, at some level, to this ever-present field and, perhaps, it is upon energy at this level that some form of memory resides. When we dream or are in a deeply relaxed state, just maybe it is possible to access the collective.

Naturally, this notion led me to consider the impact of a disconnect from the collective and a focus entirely on the self or ego. Could this be the root cause of some human issues? Do those who dream less, or have less rich dreams, suffer more? While I have never experienced mental health problems, I have cared for someone who has. Their description of a mental state where there is no light – only darkness – is sufficiently troubling, and affects so many people, that maybe a new concept is needed.

I submit this to you humbly and with a genuine desire to delve more deeply into the possibility of past lives.

SD [name on file]
Whitstable, Kent

Wet knickers

Noting Christopher Josiffe's puzzlement at his partner's perpetually wet undergarment [**FT442:64**], the composition of the fabric may provide some insight: cotton is very hygroscopic as fabrics go – it will absorb over 20 times its own weight in water, while 'modal' is around 50% more hygroscopic even than cotton. Polyamides are also hygroscopic, so it's a wonder these fabrics ever get dry.

The fact that the garment was showing 'water marks' is interesting, as it implies the presence of something besides pure water to create that discoloration. Fabric softener often contains quaternary ammonium salts, which can be deliquescent – i.e. they absorb so much water that they liquify. The production process for 'modal' also involves deliquescent materials such as sodium hydroxide.

I would suggest, therefore, that the root of the mystery is either a manufacturing error or a failure to adequately rinse out a laundry aid. Of course, however keen a material is to absorb water, it can only do so if the humidity in the environment is sufficient to provide that water. I would advise Mr Josiffe to check the humidity level in his home, as this can have health implications.

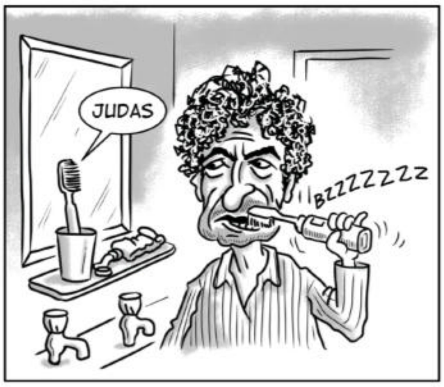
Ian I'Anson
By email

Lethal punch

Noel Rooney's always excellent and interesting Conspirasphere column [**FT443:11**] mentions the idea that the death of Alexei Navalny in a Russian Gulag might have been caused by a punch to the heart. Whether or not this was the case, this method of using a blow to stop the heart isn't such a new thing .

I strongly recall a Christmas Annual in about 1971 of a comic – possibly *Wham!* or *Hotspur* – where both the inside pages, before the actual characters' adventures began, had a many-frame cartoon history of boxing. It started with the bare-knuckle fighting of the late 17th and early 19th centuries and followed the course of what became eventually The Queensbury rules. It mentioned at some point – just before gloves of some sort, and a few rules were introduced – that as a handful of men had died due to a very particular downwards strike to just above the heart, that this punch was banned.

Mark Pearson
By email



CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

MARK CAMPBELL

Round the Longstone

I was staying on the Isle of Wight recently, and decided to visit the island's only standing stone, the Longstone, near the village of Mottistone. It was on 4 June, a hot, sunny day with not a cloud in the sky. I left my fiancée Sarah and son Oscar in the car while I walked along a path up the side of a field, over a gate and then along another path to the stone, a journey of about 10 minutes. As soon as I clapped eyes on it, I texted her to say I wouldn't be long. I took lots of photos and some video of the impressive 13ft (4m) high megalith. While I was there, a young hiker walked past. He didn't acknowledge me, which was slightly odd as it was only me and him there, and he passed quite close. Then he walked off the way I'd just come, whistling or singing a strange, haunting tune or song. Weirdly, I've been unable to recall exactly what it was, other than it was rather 'unearthly'.

I waited a few minutes, and then walked back along the path to the car. I didn't see him, but when I got back, I asked Sarah if she'd seen him. She had; she'd looked up, saw him approaching (thinking at first that it was me), and then turned back to Oscar. When she looked up again, he'd gone. She never got my text, which is unsurprising as mobile phone reception on the Isle of Wight is poor, but what is odd is that the clock on her phone suddenly jumped forward an hour and all the names on her contacts list disappeared, leaving just the numbers. (She restarted the phone later and they all came back and the clock reset itself.)

All these things in themselves are easily explicable, but their happening together at the time I was investigating this Neolithic monument are decidedly spooky.

Mark Campbell
Crayford, Kent

The vanishing scooter

I live with my wife and daughter in a quiet cul-de-sac alongside a lot of families, meaning it is common to see children playing in the street. In recent years my daughter has taken to scooting up and down with a friend of hers from the neighbourhood.

On Thursday 4 April 2024 she was out racing up and down with her friend while I popped to the local supermarket, leaving my wife at home. When I returned, about 7.45pm, it was twilight, but still just light enough to see. As I drove past our driveway (I always reverse in), I noticed a scooter lying on its side in front of our garage. I backed onto the driveway and got out, grumbling about children never putting things away. It was near dark now and I recall the scooter looking colourless, almost black, and somewhat unfamiliar.

I opened the garage and propped the scooter against a garden chair near the door. I unpacked a few things from the boot for storage in the garage and locked everything up for the night. In the distance, I could still hear children shouting and playing.

I thought nothing of the matter until a short while later when I went back into the kitchen to find my daughter's scooter lying on the kitchen floor. When asked, my daughter said that she hadn't left it on the driveway and had been using it all evening.

I should add at this point that the neighbouring children often leave things lying around on our property – water bottles, footballs, etc – so it wouldn't have been improbable for one of them to have left a scooter on our driveway. My assumption, therefore, was that I had accidentally locked up my daughter's friend's scooter in our garage and that she would come looking for it the next morning.

The following day, I woke up early and went downstairs to feed the cat and the garden birds. I went out to the garage to refill the seed box, taking my daughter's scooter with me. I wandered in and, after a short pause, realised to by bafflement that the second scooter was missing. I stood for a moment, thinking it through, wondering if I had put it somewhere towards the back – but no, I had propped it against the garden chair near the door and now it was gone. I searched all over, but the scooter was nowhere to be found.

A little rattled, I went and told my wife what had happened, and she too was mystified. My daughter later confirmed that she hadn't been in or out of the garage since the previous afternoon. A few hours later the girl from the neighbourhood turned up to play – riding her scooter. When questioned, she confirmed that her scooter had spent the night in her own garage.

So, whose scooter was it? No other claimants have since come forward, nor has the scooter ever been found, and none of our neighbours has a key to our garage. Worried I was losing my marbles, I checked the dashcam footage in my car to see if the black, oddly featureless scooter had been caught on camera, but sadly the view of the drive was obscured by our bushes.

Stefan Putigny
Andover, Hampshire

Into thin air

At eight o'clock one evening in 2009, I was in my room preparing to watch a DVD on my laptop. I'd uncorked a bottle of white wine and had two packets of a new snack from Ryvita to accompany it – a healthier alternative, I felt, to crisps. The packets were small, not much bigger than the palm of my hand. As to the contents: squares of Ryvita dusted in chilli powder. Pretty bland, actually (within a year they were removed from the market, or at least the Irish one.) I uncorked the wine, poured a nice cold glass, took a sip, then pressed

‘Play’ on the DVD. I’d opened one of the packets and had started snacking.

Ten or so minutes passed when the following occurred. (Let me assure you that I was not on drugs – never touch them – or on any prescription ‘special meds’; in short, I was utterly lucid.) A tiny, exceedingly brief – I mean a *fraction* of a second – flash of light came from the packets and they both quite literally disappeared into thin air. I sat there utterly... not spooked just *bewildered* (who wouldn’t be?). I hadn’t imagined it. But it happened to me on that evening all those years ago. That the objects in question were so utterly banal lends the whole episode a nicely absurdist edge.

To this day I cannot account for this event but it always makes me... wonder. A lot. Have any readers experienced anything similar?

Kevin Whelan
Co Galway, Eire

Smelly Contagion

In reference to Darren W Ritson’s fascinating article “The Poltergeist: Cases of Contagion” [**FT438:30-35**] there is another case which I think fits into this category. In his semi-autobiographical book *Investigating the Paranormal* (Helix Press, 2002), psychical researcher Tony Cornell (pictured above) includes a chapter entitled “The Smell” (pp.167-175), about his strange contagious experiences that started in March 1954, whilst he was living in a flat, which was part of his parents’ house in the village of Histon, near Cambridge.

After experimenting with a Ouija board and/or discussing psychical matters with like-minded friends, Cornell and 15 other people, (both separately and collectively) witnessed what he described as “an invisible column of smell”. He said that by simply moving his head from side to side, he could move into – and out of – the smelly column.

At one point, the group of friends drove in two cars to a local pub, and during the journey, Cornell noticed that the other car was parked at the roadside and its occupants were standing on the grass verge. The smell, it seemed, had suddenly materialised inside the car, and was so overpowering that they had to stop the car and get out, to escape from it.

Tony Cornell witnessed what he described as “an invisible column of smell”

The only time the smell left the flat in Histon was when Cornell’s girlfriend, Betty, went to visit her parents for three weeks in Southend-on-Sea. She even decorated her room, hoping that the smell of paint would overpower the anomalous smell, which it did to an extent, and it only returned to Histon when she returned.

He concludes: “The whole thing is so bizarre and incredible one hesitates to mention it or to ask anyone to take it seriously. It may have been a subjective experience but that appears unlikely. They were witnessed by 15 different people, at various times and in different groups.”

The smell left Cornell permanently when he moved to a different address in autumn 1954, and he noted that there were no reports of the smell or any paranormal experiences from the subsequent owners.

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

The white balloon

Two of the strangest experiences I can remember happened in the same place, years apart. When I was eight years old, I joined one of those impromptu, tenuous mixed-age adventuring parties kids can form on a summer day. Mission: explore the environs adjacent to our Indiana apartment complex. This was about 1979, when parents often insisted we stay outside and out from underfoot during daylight.

A couple of hundred feet from the closest building we prepared to leave a field of three to four foot [90-120cm] tall brush and enter a section of forest I’d never been in before. As one of the oldest, I was bravely stalking toward a visible gap in the trees when a heart-stopping shriek erupted from directly ahead. The sound was a loud, clear, stereotypical ‘witch’s cackle,’ and it routed us all in an instant.

Running pell-mell, each moment stretching to hold more panic than the last, I looked left across the field. Just above the top of the brush, at the level of my own head, I saw what I have always described to myself as a ‘white balloon’. It seemed to float along, 50ft (15m] away, parallel to my course. It wasn’t one of the other children, and it didn’t seem to be part of a body at all. As this only increased the certainty of my pending destruction, I sped up. To get home, I had to turn left – toward the balloon – and I did so. Oddly, while sprinting past the side of the field where the balloon should be, I saw nothing.

Eight years or so later I had moved several times and nothing odd had occurred to me since. Adults I told about my fright said the shriek was possibly from an owl out in the daytime, but more likely it had been a dastardly teenager scaring us just for fun. A teen myself at that point, I was fascinated by the paranormal (mostly UFOs) and had one friend who shared these interests. One day I related the earlier story and suggested we go back to the scene out of curiosity. Proto-forteans without knowing it: we were willing to believe and also willing to chuckle knowingly at misperceptions. We parked nearby and wandered the same field (completely sober, by the way). We entered the forest uneventfully through the same gap I’d spotted before. Inside we found trails, tree swings and a fire pit with the requisite beer can trimmings, confirming the earlier event was easily explained by half-feral teen behaviour.

On the way back to the car, crossing through the field, some kind of charge filled the air. I wasn’t alone in feeling it. We each asked the other “Did you feel that / see that?” We noticed something bizarre on a balcony of the nearest apartment building. Something watching us. That’s when we ran. Quizzing each other later, we had felt something odd, but reacted mostly to the figure. It was person-shaped but strangely clad: what we saw resembled the ‘JIM’ diving suit as seen in the Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*, covered in gasket-lined eyeholes, or perhaps a full-body chemical or biological hazard suit with hood and goggles.

I fully believe that a teenager having a laugh put the fear into me at eight years old, but I’ve never been able to explain the ‘white balloon’. The second experience could have been triggered by my own anxiety about that memory and the location, but why was it so visceral? Why was my feeling so contagious that my friend not only ran away but seemed to see the same figure? Or was the trigger actually experienced by us both?

Would love to hear from anyone else who has had an hallucination, vision, or extreme misidentification after a scare, and any speculation about whether such visions are an effect of or a part of stressful events. This sequence, where a vivid sound or sight announces the event, seems interestingly distinct from the “Oz factor” described by Jenny Randles, in which a mood of quiet but slightly off-kilter reality precedes strangeness. Or are they variations of the same thing?

Vincent Szopa
Seattle, Washington

Fortean Traveller

142. The Curiosities of Venice

ULRICH MAGIN finds himself overwhelmed by oddities on a visit to Venice, where miraculous churches rub shoulders with haunted palaces, and holy relics compete with tales of sea serpents and sunken lands for his attention. Could La Serenissima be the world's most fortean city?

Venice is an assault on the senses. As a tourist, you don't have just 10 palaces to explore, but hundreds; not five or six major churches, but dozen upon dozen. This sensory overload creates a kind of dizziness: the eye can't find a place to rest, and on top of that, everything you normally expect from a city is turned upside down. There are no cars, only pedestrians, and the public transport consists of boats. There are no streets (with a few exceptions), but only gaps between houses, dark, narrow and slit-like, which serve as channels for people on foot. You can't go much more than 200 yards in a straight line without ending up at a canal; and if there is no bridge, as is often the case, you're at a dead end and will have to turn back and retrace your steps. In short: if you haven't been there before, nothing can prepare you for this overwhelming experience. Venice is the quintessential fortean city, and offers a panorama of strange stories, weird buildings and curious relics.

ARCHITECTURAL CURIOSITIES

First, there are many architectural details one might miss because of the mass of fascinating things to see. In addition to the obvious sights, there are less conspicuous ones, often of a bizarre kind. For one, many of the city's church towers are leaning, sometimes frighteningly so (one hopes someone is monitoring this!). A good example is San Stefano, close to the Piazza San Marco. The church itself has a wedge-shaped ground-plan so that, once you are inside, it looks at least twice its actual length. You can enter San Giglio by water, through an entrance from one of the canals, and another canal (now walled off) runs right under the apse of the 18th century church known as I Gesuati.

The bridges, too, have strange stories to tell. At the Ponte delle Tette, built around 1400, the prostitutes of Venice were ordered to bare their breasts to cure the male inhabitants of homosexuality – although this probably had a bigger effect on those not in need

TOP: The bridge with no railings in Cannaregio. **ABOVE:** The author reclining in Attila's throne, Torcello. **LEFT:** The Ponte delle Tette, an administrative instrument for banishing homosexuality from the city.

PHOTOS: ULRICH MAGIN

ABOVE LEFT: The pyramid that marks the grave of Antonio Canova. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Brightly coloured houses at Burano. **BELOW:** The Church of Santa Maria Formosa, built at a spot suggested by the BVM where "a white cloud" settled on the ground.

of any such "cure". There are also just two bridges, out of all those in Venice, which have no railings – one is in Cannaregio, the other on the island of Torcello, the Ponte del Diavolo, unremarkable but for the fact that the Devil built it in one night. Also on Torcello is Attila's throne, a massive block of white stone shaped into the form of an armchair.

Venetian churches are filled with curious relics, most of which the ordinary visitor will not see. The Basilica di San Marco once held the horn of a unicorn, and you'll find a black Madonna in Murano. Also well worth seeing is the grave monument of the sculptor Antonio Canova (1757-1822) in the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in the form of a pyramid (the church also houses the grave of Titian). Sometimes, whole rows of houses are a sight in themselves, like the tiny, colourful houses on the island of Burano, or the famous ghetto or Jewish quarter (but be warned: book your visit to the synagogues in advance or you will not get in).

There is even a ghost island of sorts: Torcello, in the northern lagoon, was the first part of this city of land and water to be settled, and in 638 became the bishop of Altino's official seat and the first urban cluster of homes in the entire lagoon. Today, only the cathedral remains, the impressive and majestic church of Santa Maria Assunta, founded in 639. The rest of the flat island is now marsh and wetland, with two inns where formerly there were once many palazzi and 16 monastic houses in 12 parishes. If ever there was a lost city, this is it.

> ***A painting of the Madonna was believed to work miracles***

MIRACLES AND APPARITIONS

Churches are everywhere in Venice – mostly brick buildings with majestic marble facades. Some have legends attached to them that suggest geomantic planning. Santa Maria Formosa in Castello was founded by a bishop in the seventh century after the "shapely" (*formosa*) Madonna appeared to him. She asked him to erect a church "where a white cloud settles", and so essentially chose the site herself. The Chiesa dell'Angelo San Raffaele marks the spot where a flock of birds descended, after the archangel Raphael appeared to bishop Magnus of Oderzo in the seventh century, and told him to build a church in the place where he would witness this omen.

Santa Maria dei Miracoli, constructed between 1481 and 1489 by Pietro Lombardo, houses a 1409 painting of the Madonna by Nicolò di Pietro that was believed to work miracles. On 4 August 1716 the BVM appeared to Natalino Scarpa, a mute fisherman's son, to tell him of Venice's victory over the Turks. When the Virgin disappeared, it began to snow heavily! The church of St Vito, on the island of

PHOTOS: ULRICH MAGIN

PROF. MORTEL / CREATIVE COMMONS

ULRICH MAGIN

ABOVE LEFT: The resting place of some of Venice's most precious relics, the bones of St Mark, at the high altar of St Mark's Basilica. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Pillar of San Teodoro, seen from below. **BELOW:** The reputedly cursed Pallazo Ca' Dario.

NINO BARBIERI

Pellestrina, in the lagoon, is today known as Madonna della Neve ('the Madonna of the Snow') in commemoration of this event.

HOLY STUFF

Modern states seek legitimacy through elections (or at least staged elections), but in mediæval times, cities, states and dynasties were legitimised by the holy relics they could muster. Venice, being a major player on the European scene, had loads of them. Its two patron saints were St Theodoro (a dragon slayer, which is why you find dragon images all over town) and St Mark, whose lion became the coat of arms of the city state and is thus even more ubiquitous.

Venice hoarded relics, but it also traded them, earning money in the process. When Venice received three nails from the crucifixion, one was brought to the island of Torcello and one was sold to Siena. Venice also possesses two thorns from the crown of thorns which Jesus was forced to wear.

Most relics are housed in the treasury of St Mark's Basilica, but other churches have some as well, like San Pantalon, which possesses the third nail from the holy cross. The city got hold of its most valuable relics, St Mark's bones, preserved in Alexandria in Egypt, in a far less legal way – they stole them and put them in a basket covered with pork meat to avoid being searched by Muslim customs in the time of Caliph Al-Ma'mun (that is, the eighth century). The texts describing this holy theft are from the 11th century and they mention an apparition of the saint who also protected the ship from a storm on its voyage back to Venice with its holy booty.

SPOOKS

There must be hundreds of haunted houses in Venice, but the splendour of the palaces is such that the tourist trade does not need to promote them or their legends. An air of nostalgia and sadness hangs over the city – caught perfectly by Nicolas Roeg in his film *Don't Look Now* – that every visitor feels anyway.

However, each travel guide will tell you that the Palazzo Ca' Dario at the Canal Grande is thought to be cursed – several owners have been haunted by bad luck.

A giant and fierce dog, which appears only in the night, guards a treasure on the island of Campana, while a "dama bianca", a lady in white, haunts the villa built in 1555 by Andrea Palladino for Nivola Foscati on the island of Malcomtemta. She is said to have appeared in front of the noblewoman Elisabetta Foscari in the 16th century.

MONSTER REMAINS

Then there are the monsters, and the remains of monsters, to be found in the churches of the

ULRICH MAGIN

FLYING SAUCER REVIEW

VOL. 13, No. 4

13th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

UFO OVER VENICE?

See Page 17

THE LITTLE BLUE MAN ON STUDHAM COMMON

See Page 3

ABOVE LEFT: Dragon sculpture at San Margherita Church. **ABOVE RIGHT**: In Venice, even the gulls are weird – one was published as a real flying saucer in *Flying Saucer Review* (Vol. 13, No. 4) on the basis of a photo taken on 5 September 1966 by the Austrian tourist Franz Trautsamwieder near St Giorgio Church.

city. Most famous of all is the pillar on the Piazza Marco which is crowned by a statue of San Teodoro, the dragon slayer. The dragon is rather crocodile-like, and all you see from below is its long and winding tail. The pillar is one of a pair of columns, the other has St Mark's lion on top, and both form a symbolic gate to the city.

San Margherita also overcame a dragon, and while of her church in the Dorsoduro quarter only the tower remains, it has delightfully sculpted figures of a dragon and a dolphin. The Basilica of Santa Maria e San Donato, on the island of Murano, houses the bones of a dragon allegedly slain by Saint Donato, the bishop of Myra (modern Turkey), in the fourth century. The remains can be seen on the high altar, and consist of several large ribs and a big tooth.

MERMAIDS & SEA-SERPENTS

Venice has always been a seagoing nation; most of its possessions were actually outside modern Italy, in Greece, Turkey and along the eastern Adriatic coast. We should not be surprised, then, that strange sea creatures crop up again and again throughout its history, although sightings of strange marine animals near the city or in the lagoon were not reported very often. Most famous of all are the sirens of Burano, fairies rather than cryptozoological entities, who taught the women of this island how to make lace.

A "real" siren was caught on 28 May 1683 by the fishermen of Giudecca, the southernmost island of the central city. A contemporary news report describes it as "a small sea-woman, which was caught and brought alive to Venice where it will be exhibited in the fairs."

A hydra, a snake with many heads, was caught in Turkey and sent to Venice in 1530, as reported by Conrad Gesner, the Swiss zoologist, in his book concerning fish. However, he remarks that "this does not look like a real animal, but rather like an artificial body." It was perhaps a creature created by using parts of several animals, including monkeys and reptiles, in the manner of Barnum's Feejee Mermaid.

Sometimes, sea-monsters were seen in and off the lagoon. On 8 July 1860, the *Regensburger Zeitung* reported from Venice that a sea-serpent had caused great excitement in the city. "It is said to be a giant snake, 7ft [2m] long according to some, 10ft [3m] to others, and the guards at the Lido have taken shots at it, but missed. This dampens the tourist's lust for bathing in the sea, naturally."

In February 1889 a "horrible sea-monster" was caught and later exhibited at the Ponte della Pietà. "It greatly resembles a whale," local news reports said, "but it has a long snout like that of a pig." A beaked whale, perhaps?

And early in February 1935 the waves cast ashore a sea-monster at the Punta Sabbioni, at the eastern side of the entrance to the lagoon. "It measures eight metres [26ft] in length, has a diameter of two metres [7ft] and weighs 100 cwt [5,000kg]."

But the most horrible monster was an octopus that two fishermen encountered when they were fishing in the lagoon the night before the day of the dead. When they collected their lines they felt something heavy clinging to them. "To their great surprise the lid of a coffin emerged from the water." Holding fast to the lid "there was an octopus of exceptional size, bigger than any they had ever seen." On the journey home they fell asleep, when one of them "was suddenly awakened by the octopus, which had wrapped its tentacles around his face". They managed to get hold of the animal, which felt hard to the touch. "Curious, they then took the octopus in their hands and, feeling it stiff and strangely swollen, cut it open. To everyone's amazement, a human skull jumped out of the powerful mollusc." That taught them a lesson! What were they thinking, going fishing on a holy day? The story is preserved in a delightful book, Alberto Toso Fei's *Misteri della laguna*. Venice is hardly an Italian Loch Ness, but it might pay to keep an eye on the water!

LOST LANDS

If you are tired of islands, canals and boats, you can go diving to look for the parts of Venice that no longer exist.

About a dozen Venetian islands that used to be settled are now below the water level – and with them the ruins of temples, monasteries, castles and houses. According to a report in the newspaper *Die Welt* on13 March 1996, the working group Consorzio Venezia Nuova wants to locate these underwater ruins. The expert Luigi Fozzati had already drawn a first archæological map of the submerged lagoon and had rediscovered the lost island of San Marco, which contained remains from the Bronze Age and Roman times. The island itself sank after the Middle Ages.

So above you, around you and below you, numerous wonders can be seen in this most fortean of cities. And don't forget that it was here in Venice that Indiana Jones found the first clues that eventually led him to the Holy Grail!

ULRICH MAGIN is a veteran fortean researcher and compiler of FT's 'Strange Continent' column.

READER INFO

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

UK: DD Subscription 6 issues £27.95, 1 year 13 issues £55.95; Europe/USA/CAN, 1 year 13 issues £66.95/ROW £70.95. Please see house ads in the latest issue for details of special offers.

UK, EUROPE, NORTH AMERICA & REST OF WORLD

Major credit cards accepted. Cheques or money orders should be in sterling, preferably drawn on a London bank and made payable to Diamond Publishing Limited. Mail to: **Fortean Times**, Diamond Publishing Limited, 2nd Floor, Saunders House, 52-53 The Mall, Ealing, W5 3AT. NB: This address should be used for orders and subscriptions only.

Telephone payments and queries: +44 (0) 208 752 8195.
E-mail payments and queries: hello@metropolis.co.uk

HOW TO SUBMIT

Fortean Times reserves all rights to reuse material submitted by *FT* readers and contributors in any medium or format.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Contact the art director by email (etienne@forteantimes.com) before sending samples of work. We cannot guarantee to respond to unsolicited work, though every effort will be made to do so.

ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS

Please send all submissions or ideas for articles to David Sutton, Editor, Fortean Times by email: drsutton@forteantimes.com. As we receive a large volume of submissions, a decision may not be immediate.

LETTERS

Letters of comment or about experiences are welcome. Send to PO Box 1200, Whitstable, CT1 9RH, UK or email sieveking@forteantimes.com. We reserve the right to edit submissions.

BOOKS, PERIODICALS AND REVIEW MATERIAL

Contact the reviews editor at: dvbarrett@forteantimes.com

CAVEAT

FT aims to present the widest range of interpretations to stimulate discussion and welcomes helpful criticism. The opinions of contributors are not necessarily those of the editors. *FT* can take no responsibility for submissions, but will take all reasonable care of material in its possession. Requests for return of material should be accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope or an International Reply Coupon.

We occasionally use material that has been placed in the public domain. It is not always possible to identify the copyright holder. If you claim credit for something we've published, we'll be pleased to make acknowledgement.

CLIPSTERS WANTED

Regular clipsters have provided the lifeblood of *Fortean Times* since it began in 1973. One of the delights for the editors is receiving packets of clips from Borneo or Brazil, Saudi Arabia or Siberia. We invite you to join in the fun and send in anything weird, from trade journals, local newspapers, extracts from obscure tomes, or library newspaper archives.

To minimise the time spent on preparing clippings for a Fort Sort, we ask that you cut them out and not fold them too small. Mark each clip (on the front, where possible) with the source, date and your name, so that we can credit you in the listing (right) when we use the material. For UK local and overseas clips, please give the town of publication. For foreign language clips, we appreciate brief translations. To avoid confusion over day and month, please write the date in this form: 1 JUNE 2024. If you send photocopies, copy on one side of the paper only.

Mail to: Fortean Times, PO BOX 1200, WHITSTABLE, CT1 9RH
E-mail: news@forteantimes.com

WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox.

FT toes no party line.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENTS

AUSTRALIA Graham Cordon (SA), Tony Healy (ACT), John Palazzi (NSW), Len Watson (Qld). **CANADA** Brian Chapman (BC), Graham Conway (BC). **CYBERSPACE** John F Callahan, Hugh Henry, Steve Scanlon, Janet Wilson. **ENGLAND** Gail-Nina Anderson, Louise Bath, James Beckett, Claire Blamey, Peter Christie, Mat Coward, Kate Eccles, Paul Farthing, George Featherston, Paul Gallagher, Alan Gardiner, Keith George, Anne Hardwick, Richard Lowke, Diana Lyons, Dave Malin, Nick Maloret, Tom Ruffles, Meryl Santis, Paul Screeton, Gary Stocker, Roman Suchyj, Frank Thomas, Paul Thomas, Owen Whiteoak, Bobby Zodiac. **FRANCE** Michel Meurger. **GERMANY** Ulrich Magin. **IRELAND** Andy Conlon, Pat Corcoran. **ISRAEL** Zvi Ron. **NEW ZEALAND** Peter Hassall. **SCOTLAND** Roger Musson. **SWEDEN** Sven Rosén. **THAILAND** Terry W Colvin. **USA** Loren Coleman (ME), Jim Conlan (CT), Myron Hoyt (ME), Greg May (FL), Jim Riecken (NY), Joseph Trainor (MA), Jeffrey Vallance (CA).

CLIPPING CREDITS FOR FT446

Gerard Apps, David Barrett, Louise Bath, James Beckett, Peter Buttery, Kay Coggin, Terry Colvin, Pat Corcoran, Mat Coward, George Featherston, Alan Gardiner, Rob Gandy, Keith George, Brian Gibb, Mark Greener, Hugh Henry, Sharon A Hill, Michael Holt, Tony James, Rosalind Johnson, Robin Lee, Dave Malin, Nick Maloret, Richard Muirhead, Lorna Stroup Nilsson, A Oriain, Tom Ruffles, SH Scanlon, Paul Screeton, Ryan Shirlow, Paul Street, Brett Taylor, Carole Tyrrell, Clive Watson, Len Watson, Owen Whiteoak, Mark Williams, Paul Wood, James Wright.

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past recalls the legendary life-saving efforts of an unlikely Bognor Regis heroine

44. THE MERMAID OF BOGNOR

A Bognor Celebrity: Mary Wheatland, who has saved over 60 lives
MARY WHEATLAND
BOGNOR'S CELEBRATED BATHING WOMAN.

ABOVE LEFT: Mary Wheatland at the beach. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Mary wearing her two medals from the Humane Society.

Mary Norris was born in the village of Aldingbourne, West Sussex, in 1835. Her family were poor country people. She married the 23-year-old George Wheatland in 1857 and they moved to Bognor Regis, where Mary taught herself to swim, becoming assistant at the swimming academy run by Mrs Martha Mills. Mary was soon the mother of six children, but her parental responsibilities did nothing to slow her down. She became responsible for the bathing machines in front of the Beach Hotel on the eastern side of the pier. These primitive contraptions consisted of a hut on wheels, pulled down the beach by a horse. The horse was then unchained and led away as the bather changed into a swimming costume and emerged from the machine into the water. Once the swimmer returned, Mary reattached the horse and chains to the other end of the machine, pulling the bather out of the water. Mary's bathing machines were painted in yellow with red stripes. Care was taken to keep male and female bathers separated by at least 100 yards to prevent impure thoughts from arising.

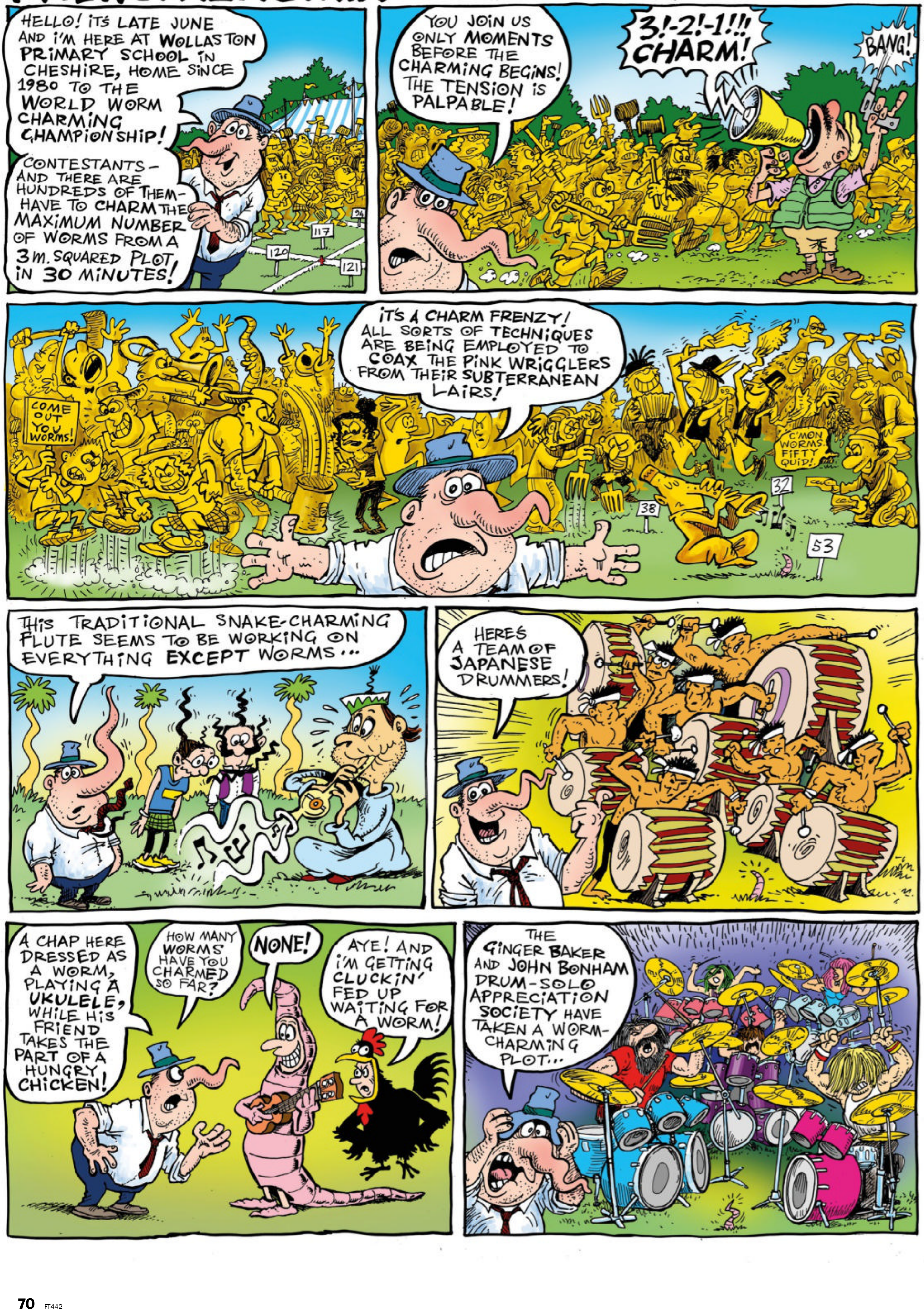
Mary's bathing machines turned out to be a profitable business, and she also rented out towels and bathing costumes to the tourists visiting Bognor Regis. Proud of her swimming prowess, she kept a keen lookout for swimmers in trouble, ready to dash into the waves and pull them to safety. Her first rescue involved the very heavy wife of a London brewer, who was paddling desperately to keep afloat in spite of her bulk. Next, a nurse got into difficulties while swimming; a male attendant had attempted a rescue, but struggled in the salty water; the valiant Mary plunged into the waves fully dressed and pulled the nurse to safety. Her third rescue was of "a little foreign lady"; her fourth, a young woman who afterwards showed her much gratitude and brought her hot coffee, a drink to which Mary was very partial. When she had completed her seventh rescue in 1879, saving Mr WP Manly by rushing into the water fully clothed and holding him afloat in a stormy sea until other rescuers came to the scene, she was awarded a medal by the Humane Society. Scenting a story, a journalist from the *Illustrated London News* went to Bognor Regis to interview the heroine of the day, being most impressed that this quiet and matronly middle-aged lady was capable of such heroics.

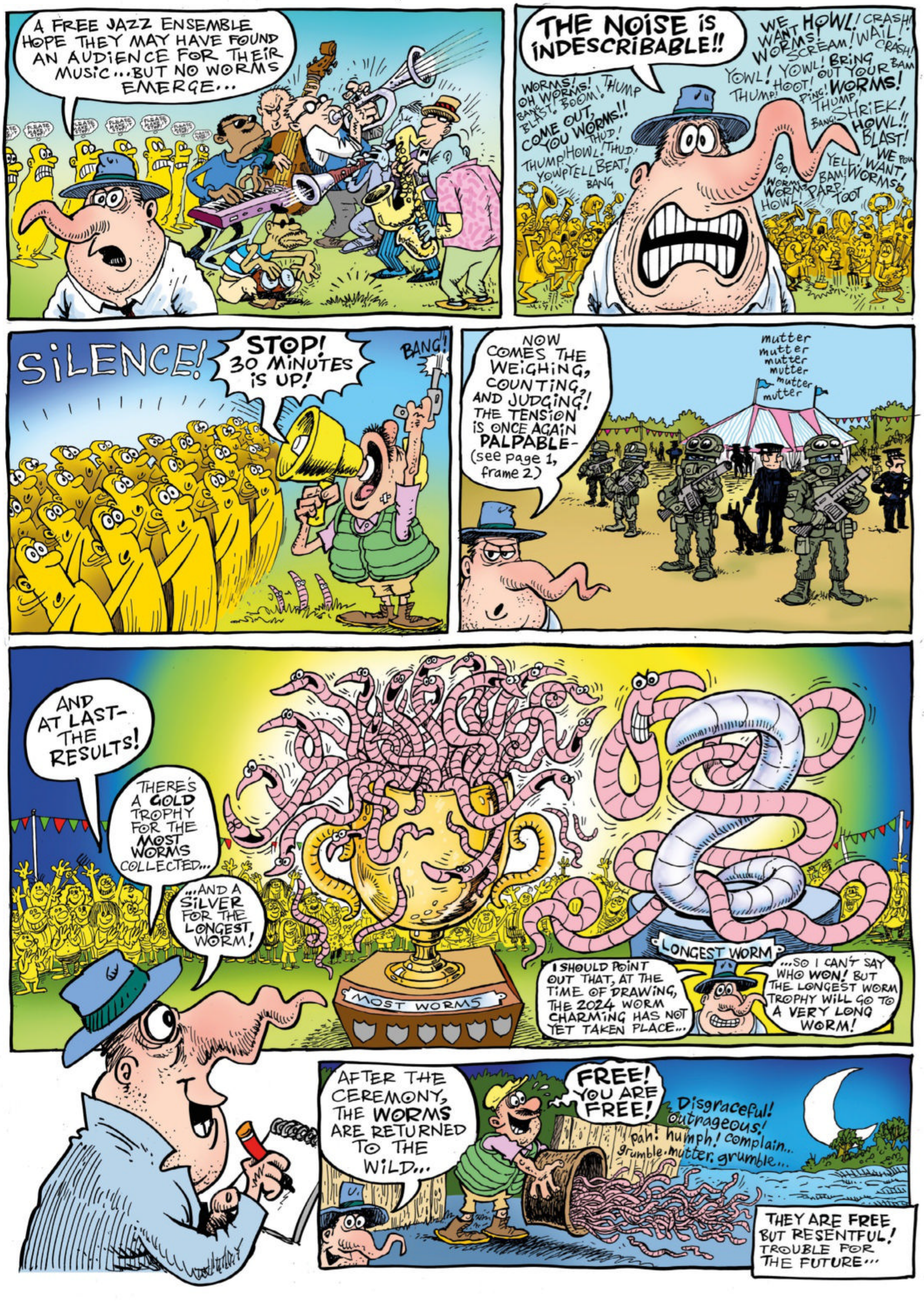
Known as 'The Mermaid of Bognor' or 'The Grace Darling of the South Coast', Mary Wheatland would carry on her bathing chair business for many years to come. Her lifesaving instincts remained as sharp as ever, and once she saved a family of five children, bringing them back to shore one by one. In 1902, there was a ceremony when she was awarded the gold medal of the Humane Society by Lord Edmund Talbot, for saving 14 people from drowning. She continued to dive from the pier until she was 70 years old, and in 1906, when she was 72, she gave a fine exhibition of diving and swimming in the open sea, admired by a crowd of enthusiastic spectators from the pier and promenades. Dressed in an old-fashioned blue serge suit with her medals prominently displayed, and wearing a straw hat, she remained one of the 'characters' of Bognor Regis, operating her bathing machines until she was 74 years old, when she handed the business over to her daughter. Mary died in 1924 aged 88, her coffin being carried to the church by local fishermen. There have been extravagant claims of how many people she really saved: one of the postcards said 60 and her obituary in the *Gloucester Citizen* said 30; a more realistic estimate is 14, as stated at the ceremony in 1902. When the *Bognor Regis Observer* published a feature on Mary in 2018, they interviewed her 97-year-old granddaughter Mrs Emily Hallett, who had a keen interest in her famous ancestor.

PHENOMENOMIX

WORM CHARMING

HUNT EMERSON and ROB GANDY


HELLO! IT'S LATE JUNE AND I'M HERE AT WOLLASTON PRIMARY SCHOOL IN CHESHIRE, HOME SINCE 1980 TO THE WORLD WORM CHARMING CHAMPIONSHIP!
CONTESTANTS – AND THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF THEM – HAVE TO CHARM THE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF WORMS FROM A 3M. SQUARED PLOT, IN 30 MINUTES!
117
120
121
YOU JOIN US ONLY MOMENTS BEFORE THE CHARMING BEGINS! THE TENSION IS PALPABLE!
3!-2!-1!!! CHARM!
BANG!
IT'S A CHARM FRENZY! ALL SORTS OF TECHNIQUES ARE BEING EMPLOYED TO COAX THE PINK WRIGGLERS FROM THEIR SUBTERRANEAN LAIRS!
COME OUT YOU WORMS!
C'MON WORMS. FIFTY QUID!
38
32
53
THIS TRADITIONAL SNAKE-CHARMING FLUTE SEEMS TO BE WORKING ON EVERYTHING EXCEPT WORMS...
HERE'S A TEAM OF JAPANESE DRUMMERS!
A CHAP HERE DRESSED AS A WORM, PLAYING A UKULELE, WHILE HIS FRIEND TAKES THE PART OF A HUNGRY CHICKEN!
HOW MANY WORMS HAVE YOU CHARMED SO FAR?
NONE!
AYE! AND I'M GETTING CLUCKIN' FED UP WAITING FOR A WORM!
THE GINGER BAKER AND JOHN BONHAM DRUM-SOLO APPRECIATION SOCIETY HAVE TAKEN A WORM-CHARMING PLOT...


A FREE JAZZ ENSEMBLE HOPE THEY MAY HAVE FOUND AN AUDIENCE FOR THEIR MUSIC… BUT NO WORMS EMERGE…
PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!
PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!
PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!
PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!
PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!
PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!
PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!
THE NOISE IS INDESCRIBABLE!!
WORMS! OH WORMS! THUMP BANG BLAST! BOOM!
COME OUT, YOU WORMS!!
THUD! THUMP! HOWL! THUD! YOWP YELL BEAT! BANG
WE WANT WORMS! HOWL! CRASH! SCREAM! WAIL! CRASH!
YOWL! YOWL! BRING OUT YOUR WORMS! BAM
THUMP! HOOT! PING! THUMP! BANG! SHRIEK! HOWL!! BLAST!
POP! WORMS! WORMS! HOWL! YELL! BAM! PARP! TOOT WE WANT WORMS! POW
SILENCE!
STOP! 30 MINUTES IS UP!
BANG!
NOW COMES THE WEIGHING, COUNTING, AND JUDGING! THE TENSION IS ONCE AGAIN PALPABLE- (see page 1, frame 2)
mutter mutter mutter mutter mutter mutter
AND AT LAST- THE RESULTS!
THERE'S A GOLD TROPHY FOR THE MOST WORMS COLLECTED…
…AND A SILVER FOR THE LONGEST WORM!
MOST WORMS
LONGEST WORM
I SHOULD POINT OUT THAT, AT THE TIME OF DRAWING, THE 2024 WORM CHARMING HAS NOT YET TAKEN PLACE…
…SO I CAN'T SAY WHO WON! BUT THE LONGEST WORM TROPHY WILL GO TO A VERY LONG WORM!
AFTER THE CEREMONY, THE WORMS ARE RETURNED TO THE WILD…
FREE! YOU ARE FREE!
Disgraceful! outrageous! pah! humph! complain… grumble. mutter. grumble…
THEY ARE FREE BUT RESENTFUL! TROUBLE FOR THE FUTURE…

COMING NEXT MONTH

EXORCIST EXTRAORDINAIRE

THE STRANGE CAREER OF DR DONALD OMAND

INFERNAL MACHINES

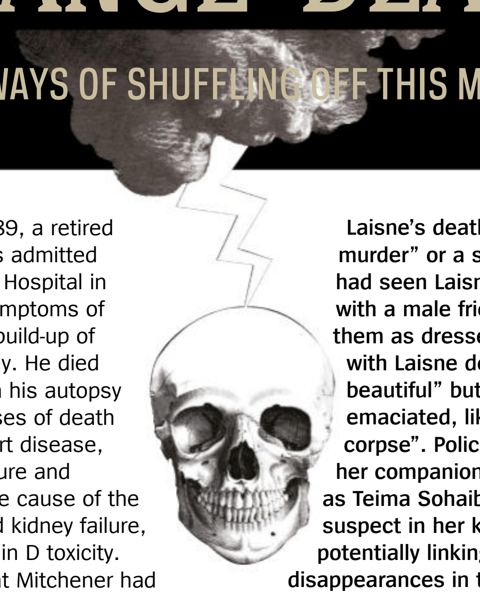
HAS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE GOT MANKIND BY THE MOLOCHS?

+ CANNIBAL ROUND-UP,
HISTORIC GHOSTS,
EPIC PET TREKS,
AND MUCH MORE…

FORTEAN TIMES 447
ON SALE 11 JULY 2024

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



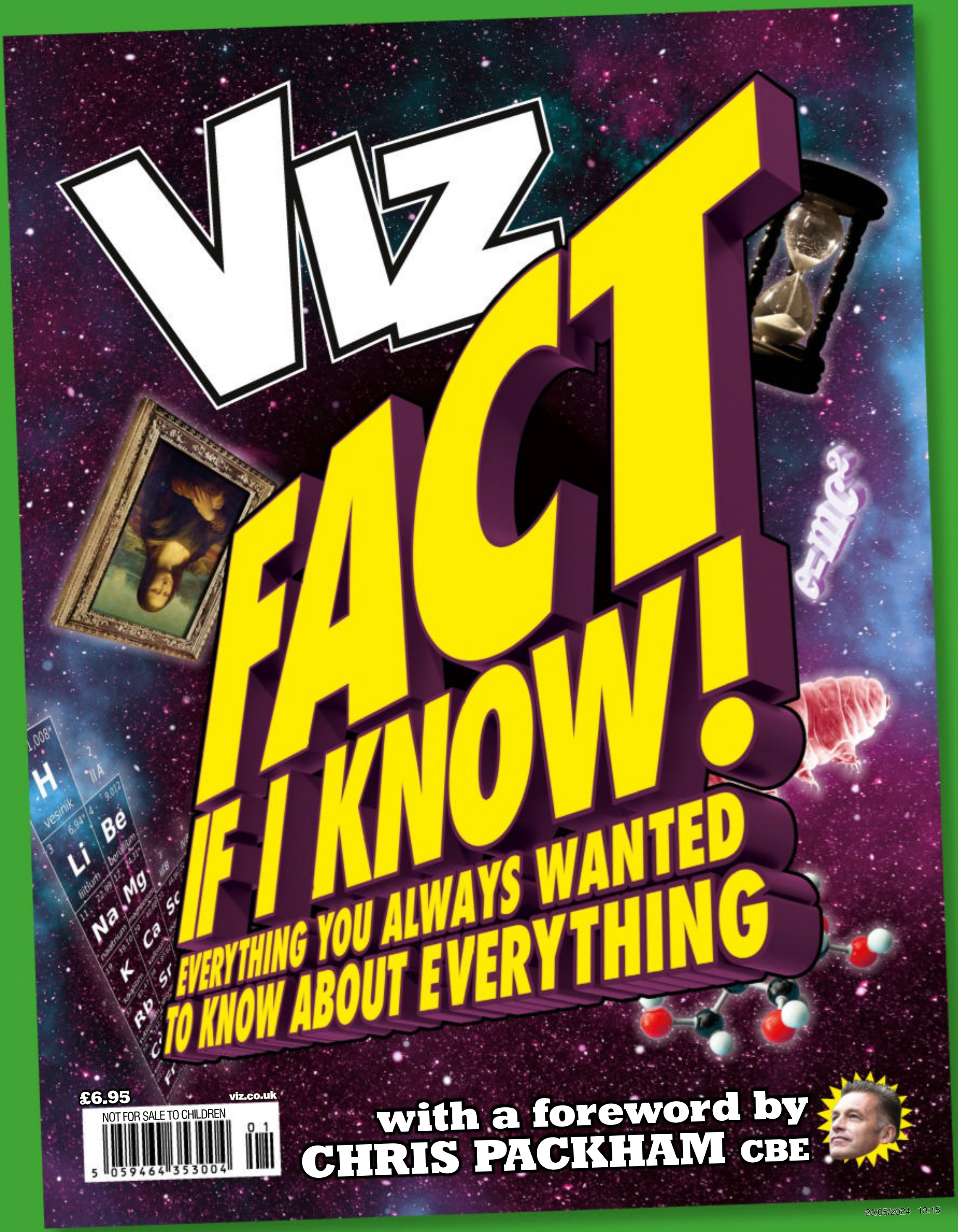
David Mitchener, 89, a retired businessman, was admitted to the East Surrey Hospital in Redhill showing symptoms of hypercalcemia, a build-up of calcium in the body. He died 10 days later, with his autopsy recording the causes of death as congestive heart disease, chronic kidney failure and hypercalcemia. The cause of the hypercalcemia and kidney failure, though, was Vitamin D toxicity. Tests revealed that Mitchener had Vitamin D levels in his blood of at least 380 ng/ml, the highest level the lab's equipment was capable of recording. The recommended level for good health is 20 ng/ml and Mitchener had been taking large quantities of Vitamin D supplements that had boosted the amount in his blood to lethal levels. Taking Vitamin D supplements was recommended as a way of boosting the immune system during Covid, but coroner Jonathan Stevens warned, "There were no warnings on or in the packaging detailing the specific risks or side effects of taking vitamin D supplements," despite vitamin supplements having "potentially very serious risks and side effects when taken in excess." *odditycentral.com, 5 Apr 2024.*

A hiker exploring an abandoned church in Italy's Aosta Valley on 5 April discovered the decomposing body of Auriane Laisne, 22, lying in the building, where she is thought to have been killed between March 26 and 27. She had been stabbed with a camping knife and shot twice in the neck and once in the abdomen, although the gunshot wounds may have been inflicted after she died. Laisne was wearing beige leggings, a sweatshirt, and a long dark coat, but had no phone or identity documents on her, although there was a pack of pink marshmallows and some other groceries nearby. There was no sign of a murder weapon. Almost no blood remained in Laisne's body and most of the dried blood on the church floor appeared to have been scraped up and removed from the scene. According to police, Laisne had come to Italy from Lyon in France having told her family that she was looking for a haunted house, which led them to believe her death could be linked to a popular ghost hunting competition taking place on French TikTok. As there was no sign of a struggle, there was suspicion that Laisne's death was a "consented murder" or a sacrifice. Locals had seen Laisne around the area with a male friend and described them as dressed "like vampires", with Laisne described as "very beautiful" but looking pale and emaciated, like a "walking corpse". Police were seeking her companion, who they named as Teima Sohaib, as their main suspect in her killing and were potentially linking it to two recent disappearances in the area. *editions.cnn.com, 10 Apr; Ilsussidiario.net, 23 Apr 2024*.

In Badaga village, in Karnataka, India, a 12-year-old boy, named as only as Chetan, was attacked and mauled to death by a tiger, and his father injured, while harvesting coffee on a local plantation. During the boy's funeral, at about 6.30 pm the following day, his grandfather Raju stepped out of the family house, about 500m (1,640 ft) away from where the boy had been killed, to relieve himself. As he did so, he, too, was pounced on by a tiger that grabbed him by the head and killed him. When news of this second death reached the remaining family members at the funeral, a third person, named as 56-year-old Jayamma, collapsed and died of shock. The same tiger was believed to be responsible for both deaths, prompting authorities to mount a major search, as they feared it had become too old to hunt other animals and had taken to preying on humans, making it likely to kill again. They eventually cornered and killed a large tiger, thought to be around 13 years old, that they identified as the man-eater. *hindustantimes.com, 14 Feb; dailymail.co.uk, 15 Feb 2024.*

In Pittsburgh, builders constructing a sports facility for the university managed to lose control of a massive steel drum weighing over a tonne. It rolled several hundred feet down a hill, broke through a fence and hurtled along an adjacent road, where it struck Aleia Lopez, 51, walking with co-workers from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Western Psychiatric Hospital. She suffered catastrophic head injuries and died at the scene. The drum continued to bounce and roll down the road, but fortunately there were no other casualties before it came to rest against a pickup truck. *[AP] 4 May 2024*.

Don't waste £9,500 a year going to university. Waste £6.95 on this.



VIZ
FACT IF I KNOW!
EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT EVERYTHING
E=mc²
£6.95
viz.co.uk
NOT FOR SALE TO CHILDREN
with a foreword by CHRIS PACKHAM CBE
20/05/2024 13:15

ON SALE NOW
in shops or order online at *shop.viz.co.uk*

3:00 AM
iPad
Horror in Culture & Entertainment
RUE MORGUE
NOW IN OUR 26th YEAR!
DAUGHTERS OF
DARKNESS
THE CHILDREN OF THE GENRE'S BIGGEST FILMMAKERS MAKE THEIR DEBUT
CAITLIN CRONENBERG'S
HUMANE
ISHANA SHYAMALAN'S
THE WATCHERS
PLUS MORE!
#218
VAMPIRE SURVIVAL HORROR GAME
V RISING
CHRIS NASH'S
IN A VIOLENT NATURE
LINCOLN INTERNATIONAL
MONSTERS RETURN
PLUS!
JOHN ROSMAN'S NEW LIFE
BOWEN DIGS UP MONSTER FROM THE OCEAN FLOOR (1954)
QUEER FOR FEAR: HORROR FILM AND THE QUEER SPECTATOR
MARRS MEDIA INC. RUE-MORGUE.COM
PLEASE DISPLAY UNDER FILM AND VIDEO
3G
9:44 AM

$6.66
PER ISSUE

A
MONSTER
APP

THE **WORLD'S #1 HORROR MAGAZINE**
IS NOW AVAILABLE PRIOR TO NEWSSTANDS ON **iPHONE** AND **ANDROID.**

VISIT RUE-MORGUE.COM OR THE APP STORE

FOLLOW US ON **INSTAGRAM, TWITTER** AND **FACEBOOK**